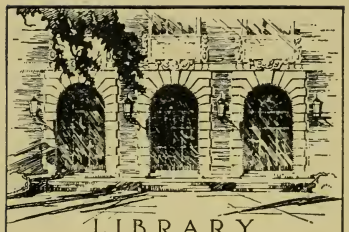
A MINGLED YARN

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"A TRAP TO CATCH A SUNBEAM"



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A MINGLED YARN.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. HENRY MACKARNESS,

AUTHOR OF "A TRAP TO CATCH A SUNBEAM," "A PEERLESS WIFE," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

"Life is a mingled yarn of good and evil."

LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.

1872.

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"WALTER ASHLEIGH"

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A MINGLED YARN.

CHAPTER I.

The warm rays of the summer sun came aslant through the painted window on the broad oaken staircase of the large old Manor House in the village of Haseley Mere, and rested on the head of its gentle occupant as, with slow and somewhat uncertain steps, she descended it, her gold-headed ebony stick and the carved balusters needed to support the small form of the old lady, on whom that summer sun had shed its rays for nearly eighty years. Had she stood there but a moment, herself and her surroundings would have made a beautiful subject for a

painter. The dark oak of the panelled walls was covered with old family pictures in heavy frames; and the stairs were carpeted with a crimson-velvet pile carpet, with curtains of the same colour falling before the doorway which led into the inner hall. Over the large painted window, picturesquely arranged in a star pattern, were some cutlasses and swords, and beneath the window, a large case of stuffed birds of brilliant plumage. The little lady herself was as bright and beautiful a specimen of old age as could well be imagined. Perfect health was in her sweet merry face; cheeks rosy as the apples in her own orchard; and an abundance of thick silken hair, perfectly white, lay beneath her cap, braided over the sweet fair forehead like a silver band. That cap, moreover, was the prettiest thing of its kind; for Mistress Elizabeth Medlicott retained the artless coquetry of those days when she had

turned the heads of half the county, and earned for herself the title, bestowed on her by her saucy companions, of "the destroyer of the peace of families." And she had laughed and danced away her early girlhood, and then been transplanted from her country home to a court, and been numbered amongst the Queen's ladies, just as much a favourite there. Courtiers and nobles were fascinated by the bright smiles—the quick wit —the infectious cheerfulness of this fresh country girl, who came amongst them like a ray of sunshine, refreshing the dull monotony of their court life; and giving new zest, by her own innocent delight, to the amusements which palled upon them. It was strange, all thought, how she herself passed on her happy way, making, as it were, bright lines of light—go where she would, in palace or in cottage — leaving all to mourn her absence and long for her return, and yet

remain heart whole. Kind and courteous to all, there was no one in her father's house, or in the dissipated court of the fourth George, who seemed to be singled out as the one who could win and wear this sweet fresh flower; and through all these years, to her beautiful, honoured, still cheerful old age, she had retained the name of Mistress Elizabeth Medlicott, nor had ever been known by her most intimate friends to wish to change it. Her sister Dorothy had married—some said for his title only—the old Duke of Claverton, whose large estates joined her father's. He had died, and left her with four daughters and a handsome fortune; but the title had gone to a distant cousin. She did not long survive him; and then Mistress Elizabeth Medlicott took the poor young orphans into her charge—and in her loving care they had remained, not missing even their mother, so tender and so wise was the guidance of dear Mistress Medlicott.

As she came now slowly down the stairs, a loud peal of ringing laughter made her face light up with pleasure, as at the sound of cheerful music; and through the velvet curtains rushed four girls, varying in age from twenty to sixteen, dragging along a large black dog, with a wreath of flowers round his neck, and a scarlet saddle-cloth on his back, on which was seated a tiny white kitten.

"Darling Auntie, where are you?—look here!" they exclaimed, in a chorus which echoed up the large staircase; "make haste! Kitty won't stay much longer! quiet, Nep! keep quiet!"

"Oh, here you are, you darling!" said Gertrude, running to her; and, offering her her arm, she led her down the remaining stairs to where the other girls stood holding the dog, who was growing impatient of his load and of all their frivolity, which he tolerated for the love he bore his fair young

mistresses, but which he felt now ill became his grave years.

"You very silly maidens!" said Auntie, laughing, "will you be babies for ever? Where is Dr. Stillwell all this time?"

"Oh! he set us free, auntie! the day was so fine, he said, it was a sin to keep young things over musty books. Sunshine was made for butterflies and pretty girls, and they should always be flying about in it," said Gertrude, standing with her golden head on her Auntie's shoulder.

"He said so, or you said so—which, Birdie?" answered Mistress Elizabeth, gazing into the laughing blue eyes.

"I began it, and he finished it."

"Gertrude does just as she likes with Dr. Stillwell, aunt," said Lilian, the eldest; "she will never learn anything; she does nothing but play."

"Oh, Lily! never learns anything?" said the

girl, lifting her head from its resting-place; and, standing in an upright, formal attitude, with folded hands, she repeated, in a monotonous tone: "In the year 565, Columba, a Celtic prince of Royal birth, accompanied by twelve companions, crossed from Ireland in a boat made of ox-hide stretched over a framework of osier. They formed their settlement at Skye, one of the Hebrides, afterwards called Turnkill, or the Island of Columba of the Celts."

"Well done! well done!" laughed Auntie, patting her on the shoulder; "that's more than I could have said. Come, the luncheon gong has sounded some time; release Nep and Kittie, and let us have some food for our bodies, after Birdie's food for our minds."

Poor Nep, free from his encumbrances, stretched and shook himself with a little yelp of satisfaction, walked with stately steps into the dining-room after his young mistresses,

where he laid down on the large bearskin rug; and, good Mistress Medlicott taking the head of the table, the meal began with the merry chatter of the girls mingling harmoniously with the song of the birds coming through the open window, whence, too, the scent of roses from the rose garden, on which the large dining-room window looked, came pleasantly; rich, heavy blossoms, hanging their heads as if in shyness of their own beauty, or to listen modestly to the amorous bee buzzing his love song, or to shrink from the admiring gaze of some large painted "admiral" lying on the glossy green leaves beside them.

In perfect accordance with the rich luxuriance of the gardens—with their velvet lawns, their wealth of flowers of every shade and hue, the pretty grass walks, the fountains, the wilderness and fernery, the greenhouses and hothouses—was the grand old

house itself. The Medlicotts for many centuries had owned this beautiful place; and, when orphaned, the poor young ladies, Lilian, May, Edith, and Gertrude, stood alone in their own grand home—within this, the childhood's home of their mother, Mistress Elizabeth urged them to take up their abode with her, who had been, ever since, as second mother, guardian, friend, adviser—aye, and playfellow to the four girls. Tenderly she had watched them, jealously guarded them from taint of sin or evil; and they grew up like fair, pure lilies on one stem, yet with that variety in tastes and disposition so common to notice in children brought up even under the same influence and in the same way.

They were not models of beauty, any of them; but a fine, high-blooded look had stamped them all, and a radiance, born of goodness, of cheerfulness, of single-mindedness, of contented, loving natures, shone out

of their large, deep-set eyes, the one feature which, in them all, alone was strictly beautiful.

Three were fair—fair as Saxons, with the glittering golden hair and the pink-white skins, like the delicate lining of a shell; but May—"Gipsy May"—as the others laughingly called her, was like a cluster of ripe brown nuts; glossy brown hair, with golden tips, big grey, deep-set eyes and roguish dimples lurking at the corner of her rich red lips, and a grave earnestness in the eyes, strangely contrasting with them. The skin had not, either, that delicate tint of her sisters, and the roses on her cheeks had a richer glow. Auntie called her her "Nut-Brown Maid," and if she had a treasure nearest to her heart amongst her darlings, perhaps it was this one, for she was her mother's image.

"Where is Ma'mselle?" asked Lilian,

after they had taken their places at the table.

"Oh, poor old dear! she never hears the gong, somehow. I'll go and find her," said Gertrude; but the door opened as she rose from her seat, and the lady entered.

"Oh! so confuse, so shame, to be not here; pardon, Mees Medlicott," she said, hastily taking her place at table.

"Never mind, Ma'mselle; make no apologies; it is only luncheon, you know."

"Did you not hear the gong, Ma'mselle, dear?" asked May.

"Oh, yes, I hear him, for I sets wis my door open; but just when I was about to descend, I get stop by Marie wis some long tale about that poor moser of her's —who is no better, she say—and I promise to ask for some good ting to be sent her."

"By all means. See that jelly goes, Lilian, dear," said her aunt, "after luncheon."

"You are a good thing! you dear! you," said enthusiastic May, seizing the hand of the little Frenchwoman, and covering it with kisses.

"Ah, fie! flatteuse; if I was to listen to all you tell me, I should be so vain, so vain;" but her face shone with pleasure, as it always did, at the praises of her pupils.

Beneath the roof of the old Manor House, Mademoiselle Le Clere had found a home for thirteen years. She had come into the grounds one day leading her poor blind father, whom she was striving to support by singing ballads—the last resource his sad affliction had left them. Driven from his home, robbed of all he owned in the world, in the sad revolution of his country, he had been earning a subsistence by giving music lessons in the county town; but a sick wife for years was an expense he could not support, and at the same time provide for

the future; and, when death released her from her suffering, he lost his sight, and starvation stared them in the face. His child, Lisette, had a sweet bright voice; and, taking the poor broken-hearted, sightless old man by the hand, she sallied forth to try this last hope. Providence led her steps into the Manor House; Mistress Elizabeth was walking down the shrubbery; the sad tale was gently drawn from her, and in another week Lisette was installed as nursery governess to the little girls, and old Monsieur Le Clere was in the Medlicott Alms-houses. Devotion is a mild phrase to express anything like the sentiments that Mademoiselle, entertained for the family in which she had thus become domesticated. Her home training had been excellent in the happy days of their prosperity; the parents had moved in a good position; and they had, in all their misfortunes, retained their good manners, and never lost the stamp

of their better culture—thus she became no bad companion for the young ladies, and they soon rapidly acquired her language. Dr. Stillwell, to whom the rest of their education was intrusted, owed also a deep debt of gratitude to Mistress Medlicott. Through gross ill-usage of a so-called friend he had lost his all, and had come to Haseley Mere to canvass for the head mastership of a school in Meresborough. He failed, and was returning to London to join the herd of half-starved daily tutors ; but Mistress Medlicott heard the sad story, and assuring him that he was the very person she required to teach her girls Latin, Arithmetic, History Ancient and Modern, and Writing, she, by this amiable fiction, induced him to take some pleasant lodgings in the village, and accept a yearly salary to instruct the girls for two hours every morning. The ladies, Lilian, May, and Edith, had left the school-

room ; only Lady Gertrude remained to him now, and each morning he dreaded to be told that she was no longer to receive his instruction. He was so happy ; the life was so peaceful, so suited to his tastes. From the grand library of the Manor House to his own pretty little room in the sunny village, the learned books had been drafted, which the enforced sale of all his property had deprived him of; and there, in the summer time, with the monthly roses climbing around the little window, and the pleasant sound of the rippling stream that ran clear and limpid down the centre of the village street, little wooden bridges crossing it at short distances, the voices of many children, the busy whirr of the water mill, and the blacksmith's anvil at the forge opposite—there, with all these sounds, dear now to him from happy association, he wrote grave disquisitions on history or classic lore, essays, and lectures, which he

occasionally delivered in the Town Hall at Meresborough. Gentle mannered, silent, and abstracted, but with a large tenderness of heart, which made him careful to hurt nobody by word or deed, he was loved and respected by all the village, but by none held in greater reverence than by the old schoolmaster.

Peter Poyntz was a simple-minded, homely old fellow, no trained master; the school of Haseley Mere was not under government inspection. From his youth he had known the Scriptures, and followed, to the best of his human power, their precepts; and so he was deemed by the Rector a fitting person to take charge of the little village boys who filled the school-room, and swarmed out like bees (only with far more noise) on to the village green, some half-dozen of them always clinging to him, as he went for the walk between school hours he deemed it a duty for his health to take. He wrote a good

business hand, could cast accounts, and read well enough to take the clerk's place when he was ill or wanted a holiday. The Rector thought that was enough for the youth of Haseley Mere; and though he had come there quite a stranger, with threadbare clothes, the people had accepted him most contentedly, though they had the strange feeling, prevalent in many villages, that no one should be employed who did not belong to the place. But poor Peter was gentle and unassuming, and there was a touching pleading look in his face, hard to be resisted. The children took to him at once; so, for some fifteen years or more, Peter Poyntz had been the village schoolmaster, and had, as I have said, chosen Dr. Stillwell as his model of all that was good and wise.

Many a time might the two old men be seen together in the Doctor's little room, conning some learned book, the schoolmaster

listening reverently to the Doctor, reverencing the more because he understood so little of what he said; the Doctor, proud and pleased with such an attentive auditor, striving hard to explain the difficult passages. They were a curious contrast; the spare, thin, bent form of the master, with the homely face and hands bespeaking his plebeian origin, and the grave, massive figure of the Doctor, with gentleman stamped on every feature, and the hands delicately pure and white — that unmistakeable mark of good blood. Both men had suffered severely, but over one the storm had passed, leaving but little trace behind; the other it had seemed to have bruised and shaken, and left but a shadow of his former self. None of the friends of his youth would have recognised in that bent, shrivelled form, with the sad, weary eyes, the bold, bluff Peter, the carpenter—foremost at cricket, at football, at village dance, or

country merry-making; the best singer of a good drinking song, the loudest laugher at a good joke. He could smile now, a smile of great sweetness, but it was rare, and seldom bestowed on any but children. One fair-haired boy would tell how, when he first came to Haseley Mere, he had stopped him on the green, and looking eagerly at him, asked his name; and then answered, "No, no, but how like"—and, placing a hand on his head, bade him be a good boy, and love and honour his parents, and God would bless him; and ever since, meet him when he would, he would smile at him, and if he passed the school, give him pears from the large tree that grew on the school house, when they ripened, or milk or oranges; always saying the same words: "Be good to your parents, and God will bless and prosper you."

After the mid-day at the old Manor House,

the girls and Ma'mselle generally went for a ramble, sometimes to visit some of their favourites in the village; and on festivals, with a basket of the fairest flowers, which her pupils helped to gather for her, Ma'mselle would visit the churchyard to lay upon the blind man's grave—for the old father had been for some years at rest—these tokens of his loved memory. The girls would wait for her by the stile which led away into the meadows, or in some cottage near. To-day they chose the stile, and had grouped themselves quite picturesquely beside it, and were laughing gaily, parrying the showers of buttercups and daisies which Gertrude kept throwing at them, when a manly voice, saying, "By your permission, ladies," startled them, and a tall fair man, with more than an average amount of good looks, and a perfect stranger to the village, appeared, wishing to cross the stile. The girls rose, endeavouring

to recover their sobriety; but Gertrude, whose hands at the moment were full of the flowery missiles, threw them as he spoke, and, with a little cry of dismay, started back as she saw that, by the sudden movement of her sisters, they had gone full in the stranger's face, one or two, as they fell, remaining sticking to his coat. He picked them carefully off; and, as he leapt the stile, he turned, and lifting his round felt hat, displaying as he did so a mass of curly chestnut hair, bowed low and gracefully to Gertrude, and placing the flowers in the band of the hat, with a bright smile that lighted all his face, he went on quickly across the meadows.

"Oh, Gerty!" exclaimed the three girls.

"Well, I could not help it; you jumped up so suddenly," said Gertrude, half inclined to cry with vexation, as the girls, seeing Ma'mselle approaching, ran eagerly forward to tell her the adventure, and a fresh burst

of laughter was elicited at poor Gertrude's expense.

"Oh! dere is no harm done," said Ma'm-selle, in pity to Gertrude. "If he is a stranger, ve shall see him no more; dat vill be all rights." But the girls could not forget it, or cease all the way home to wonder who he was, so rarely through their quiet village did any one pass whom they did not know by sight.

"Where is Auntie?" was the first question on their arrival. She was in her room, the servant said. Then they must postpone telling her this wonderful news, for they respected this one peculiarity most rigidly; she could not bear to be disturbed when she had taken refuge in her own apartment. It was not often, or for long at a time, that she did so; but there were days in the year when, as soon as she had presided at the luncheon, she went to her room, locked her door, and

requested that she might be alone until her bell rang. This order was never infringed, but to-day it was a sad trial to Gertrude to wait. She was so longing to tell Auntie about their adventure with the stranger; but, consoling herself by making the other girls promise that she might tell it all herself, and that when Auntie came down they would call her directly, she betook herself to the large pleasant room devoted to the girls' use. It looked out on the lawn, with a peep through the trees at the village beyond, and had a large bow window, and deep window-seat, where May delighted to tuck herself up and read. It was a room between two others, in which the girls slept; Gertrude and May sharing one, Lilian and Edith the other. Often in the winter nights they would all sit in their dressing-gowns over the fire; or, in the summer, by the window in the large room, talking and laughing

when poor Ma'mselle, having tenderly kissed them all, thought they were peacefully sleeping, till Gertrude's ringing laugh would betray them, and she would come back gently to chide and bid them all to bed.

Here Gertrude now tried to amuse herself until the bell rang she so longed to hear. Strange it would have been to her and all the girls if they could have seen into that room and watched the dear little Auntie they loved so much, seated before a desk, from which she had taken a large packet of papers, yellow with age, and seen the large tears slowly coursing down the cheeks and dropping on the papers held in her trembling hands. See her press to her lips one tied round with blue ribband, and then open and read it, a smile shining amongst the tears.

It is in a boy's large school-boy hand, blotted and untidy; about his games, his

work, his favourite friends; but there is a postscript, over which she lingers—"I've got the sprig of myrtle you gave me safe; I shall keep it for ever."

She opens another paper, the tearful smile still on her face; there is a sprig of myrtle in it, and a curl of brown hair; they are folded away in the big letter, and then she opens another, in a more formal hand, though evidently the same, and the smile fades away, leaving only the tears, as she reads the sweet passionate words, signed with the same signature as the former—"Bertie."

"Poor boy," she murmured; "but it was better as it was; and he knew I loved him too well to let him wreck his own happiness," and she read a letter, which was thus endorsed: "A copy of my answer to poor Bertie. God bless and make him happy."

She read it through before she folded it up again, and then took from another en-

velope a cutting from a newspaper and a letter worn with much reading. The paragraph announced the loss of the troop ship Euphrates. Amongst the sufferers named was the Honourable Bertie Alleyne, youngest son of the Earl of Beauwater, and the letter was one from his mother, in which she wrote: "I send you, my dear Elizabeth, a lock of hair which I believe to be yours, and a sprig of myrtle my beloved son has evidently treasured for your sake. I cannot throw away what he has valued, and you are the best person to have it. Doubtless you will laugh at his boyish passion, but it was a very true one; and I only hope, my dear girl, the husband you choose will love you as truly."

Yes, this was Mistress Medlicott's story; she had inspired young Bertie Alleyne with a passion not uncommon in young lads for girls much their elders; and at first Elizabeth had laughed at and petted him

alternately ; but at length the genuine love, the freshness and truth of the young adorer, contrasted with the hollowness of the courtiers surrounding her, touched her heart, and she found that for ever in her thoughts and in her dreams was the voice and face of Bertie Alleyne. She had steadily refused to listen to him seriously; but now an order came for him to go with his regiment abroad, and he once more pressed his suit and implored her to promise to be his wife on his return. Her common sense, of which she had an unusual share, showed her that this would be folly ; that, in years of absence, the impetuous love would fade; and that, when he returned in the full bloom of manhood, he might feel—which he refused to acknowledge now—pained by the difference of age, which would then be more marked. But it was with bitter tears falling on the paper that she refused his earnest pleading. She would not see him,

lest her resolution should fail; and only gave him this word of hope—that if he returned to find her unmarried, and he himself was in the same mind, she would then, perhaps, be his wife. With this he was fain to be content; and, writing one more passionate letter of love and regret, he left England—to return no more. In the cold waters his love and his life ended; and Mistress Elizabeth Medlicott, burying in her heart his secret and her own, went on her way with the same sweet unselfish cheerfulness and consideration for others which made her so popular, leaving, as I said, all to wonder why no one won and wore the fairest and brightest ornament of the English Court.

When she had carefully read all these papers she folded them in a large envelope and directed them to the Lady Lilian, and having sealed them carefully, she deposited them in her desk, leaving only out the sprig

of myrtle, on the paper containing which she wrote, "To be buried with me;" and then, going to the window, she let the sweet summer breeze blow on her face, to bear away on its wings the traces of tears; and with a slight laugh, she said, half aloud, as she turned away, and taking her ebony stick prepared to go downstairs:

"Who would think an old woman like me could be such a fool? But when I look at those things I feel again only twenty. Ah! well; it has been like a potent charm, keeping me from evil, all these years I believe—and past already man's allotted time upon earth—I may hope soon to go to him;" and in a few moments more the bell had sounded Gertrude had stayed to hear, and "Auntie" was descending the stairs to take her place in the library, where she always sat until dinner.

CHAPTER II.

At the entrance to the village of Haseley Mere there was an old house called the Priory, having, like all old houses, a score of legends attached to it. Haunted rooms and strange noises, and blue-lights, making nervous servants give warning, and causing the villagers to come home by a longer road rather than pass at night the Priory grounds. It was certainly well calculated to have such an evil character, for one wing of it was uninhabited; in the other there were four or five large rooms which were entered by a dark staircase from the gallery, into which the principal bedrooms opened, which were also untenanted, save by spiders and rats and

mice, the latter, probably, the real culprits in the matter of the ghostly noises reported to be heard. But the house had obtained a bad character years ago, when a ghastly murder had been perpetrated there, and the house had remained for many years uninhabited. It was taken then by a miserable miser, tempted by the low rent offered for the grand old place, and he died in one of the rooms, and was not discovered till the length of time since he had been seen excited the curiosity of some poor cottagers near, and, forcing the door, they found the wretched being, who had thus died alone and untended. Again, for another long period, the house stood empty; and then the present possessor bought it, had it put in thorough repair, laid out the grounds with most exquisite taste, and took possession of it one warm summer evening, appearing in the large moth-eaten pew on Sunday, an object

of intense interest to the villagers. He was accompanied by a pale fair girl, more interesting than pretty, but with such a look of sadness in her large dark eyes, that she attracted the attention and raised the curiosity of the congregation tenfold.

"Why, my dear," said Mrs. Pope the butcher's wife, to Mrs. Snip the tailor's wife, "it's most unnatural; the poor young thing can be scarcely seventeen, and she looks as though she had the cares of the whole world on her. Is it his wife or his daughter? I heard he was married."

"Daughter, my dear creature, surely; why he must be a long way the other side of forty."

"Well, but she may have been forced into the marriage, or summat of that sort; for there must be some reason for that ere young thing to have such a look upon her, when she ought to be as gay and winsome as the birds on the trees."

"Well, we shall know in time; he's a handsome man enough, and if she's his daughter, I'm sure he's uncommon kind and civil to her."

The same kind of conversation went on throughout the village, and the subject was discussed also at the Manor House, the terribly sad, pale face of the young girl having also attracted the notice of the young ladies there. The new comers served the village for gossip for some time, and at length, by dint of persevering enquiry, they learned that Mr. Ashleigh was a man of immense property, made in Australia; that he was supposed to be a widower, and this was his only daughter, and he had two sons.

On the day when my story opens, seated on the lawn of the Priory gardens was a young, bright, handsome fellow, with a cricketing hat set jauntily on the top of his chestnut curls, in which was stuck a bunch

of buttercups. On the ground, stretched out at full length, playing with a little skye terrier, was another young man, shorter than his companion, who was above the ordinary height, with dark hair and eyes, a slight brown moustache, and with a kindly look in his face, which made him better than handsome; he was laughing heartily now at the remarks of his companion, who, seated with one leg thrown over the arm of the garden chair on which he was lolling, was running on a string of absurdities, which, though not witty, were sufficiently ridiculous to create merriment.

"What a fellow you are, Rupert," said his companion; "but you have by no means satisfactorily explained why you cannot stop here until Monday, and then we could both go to town together."

"My dear Walter, I hate explanations; I never ask for them, and I never give

them ; they're never satisfactory, and seldom convincing. I can't because I can't, that says all that is necessary, and saves a woful waste of time and breath."

"Well, you shan't go until after dinner, if I die for it. Oh, bother! here's the governor;" and as he spoke, from the front windows of the library, Mr. Ashleigh stepped out on to the lawn, and coming forward with both hands extended, he said:

"Ah! my dear Carrington, I'm charmed to see you; it's a sight good for sore eyes, to use a homely but expressive phrase. This is your first visit to our new abode."

"Yes, sir," said the young man, rising and taking the extended hands. "I don't know how it is, all my friends complain of me."

"Then turn over a new leaf, my boy, and come and see us often," answered Mr. Ashleigh, seating himself beside Carring-

ton. "My dear Walter, can you not find some better occupation than teasing poor little Shock?"

"I have not tried, sir," answered Walter, still continuing to induce Shock to sit up; "I am so well satisfied with this one."

"On the principle of small minds being amused with small things, eh?" answered his father, with a smile upon his very handsome face, which, to many who came in contact with him, was more aggravating than agreeable.

"I have not gone into the matter at all, sir; sit up, you naughty little animal, do," he said, administering a box on the ear to the dog of such a severe character that Shock rolled over on her back, and wagged her tail and licked his hands, and shewed she had evidently mistaken the reproof for a caress. "Go along, Shock; I shan't take any more pains with you. You are as in-

corrigibly stupid as your master. Come and look at the nags, Rupe."

"You are going to stay, I trust, Carrington?" said Mr. Ashleigh, as Walter rose from the ground and put his arm through Rupert's.

"No, sir; only an hour or so."

"Dear, dear, I am *so* sorry; for I am unfortunately going out to dine, so I shall not see you again. Walter, try and persuade your friend to give us the pleasure of his company, at least until Monday."

"I have, my dear father, done all I could, and I have signally failed.

"Has Grace tried her extraordinary powers of persuasion?" asked Mr. Ashleigh, with another of his peculiar smiles.

"I don't think Grace is in," said Walter, hurriedly, and a shade of annoyance passed over his face as he spoke. "Come along," he said, giving his friend's arm an impatient pull.

"Good-bye, then, Carrington; as I cannot have the pleasure of saying '*au revoir*,' remember me to Major Carrington. He's well, I hope?"

"He was very well a day or two ago, sir—good-bye," answered Carrington, as another pull of his arm reminded him of his friend's impatience.

"Have a cigar?" asked Walter, when, the adieux completed, they were strolling along.

"Don't mind, Pop, if I do; are they good? I'm nasty particular."

"Well, taste and try; you're welcome to throw it away if you like—or rather if you don't like, eh?"

"I say, what are you at?" exclaimed Rupert, as Walter began trying to push the buttercups from his hat with a little cane he had in his hand.

"Why, what are these concerns in your hat?"

"Don't touch them, my dear fellow; they're priceless."

"Really! I shouldn't have thought it, seeing the millions that grow in this neighbourhood; but I suppose they're rare in yours."

"My dear Pop, they were thrown at me by one of the prettiest little girls I have ever seen —four pretty girls, I may say. Tell me who they are;" and he related his adventure, and gave a description of the ladies.

"The ladies of the Manor House, I'm sure; they are nice girls; but I can't see their beauty."

"Of course not, Pop, you never can; you're the most difficult fellow to please I ever saw."

"Oh! I beg your pardon; but you're always going into fits about somebody's beauty, and I'm sick, too, of hearing of those Medlicott girls."

"Medlicott! Is that their name?"

"No, not a bit; but I invariably call them so. They're swells, you know—daughters of the Duke of Claverton, rejoicing in the respective names of Lady Lilian, Lady Edith, Lady May, and Lady Gertrude Murray. But, I say, old fellow, I could show you one worth a dozen of them—and she's only a farmer's daughter."

"Oh! hang it, man! don't go and do that sort of thing," said Rupert.

"What sort of thing?"

"Why, getting up a sentimental love, which would be a deuce of a bore to you after a bit. It reads so prettily in a book—cottage covered with vines; doves in the porch; Mary standing feeding them—short petticoats—beautiful ankle—straw hat—wavy wealth of chestnut hair, and all that sort of thing; but I wouldn't, if I were you."

"Why, Rupert, you're writing a three-

volume novel. Don't be alarmed, my dear fellow, sentiment's not in my line; but we were talking of beauty, and I say my little Kathleen O'Brian is prettier than all the fine ladies I ever saw."

"Kathleen O'Brian! What! a Paddy?"

"Yes; with the prettiest taste of the brogue I ever heard. Her father was a soldier, and married an Irish girl. She has been in Ireland a great deal; but she was born in England. Her father and mother are both dead; and she lives with her grandparents—a jolly old couple—farmers of the old school. You shall see her next time you come down."

"Ah! I don't know when that will be. I see you in town, you know, and I—I don't like the country much."

"Queer chap, you are, Rupert. I say, we're lounging away all our time, and you've seen nothing. Oh! I say, I tell you what

I'll do—take you to see your divinities. I ought to drop a pasteboard there. I didn't call last time I was down; there's lots of time before dinner. If they're at home, I'll introduce you to the party I think of making up to. My sweet little Mistress Elizabeth Medlicott is a jewel."

"Who's she?" asked Rupert, as they turned towards the house."

"A delightful little lady, as you will say, when you see her; she takes care of these ladies—they, poor lassies! being orphans. Here's Grace! Captain Carrington will not stay longer than this evening, Grace."

"So my father told me," said the girl offering her hand to their guest. "You have disappointed Walter, I am sure; he reckoned on your remaining until Monday." The tones of her voice, very low and soft, were as sad as the expression of her face,

which did not change or light up into any smile of welcome, but kept its calm, joyless look and pallid colour.

"I am sorry, but I cannot stay," said Rupert, as he offered her his arm and led her through the open window into the library, where it was Mr. Ashleigh's fancy to take all meals but dinner, and where the luncheon was still on the table.

It was a superb room, speaking of the great wealth, and taste also, of its possessor. Books covered the walls entirely, except over the mantel-piece, and there hung a full-length portrait of a beautiful woman, which, by its likeness to both Walter and Grace, told that it was their mother.

"How is Everard, by the bye, Pop?" asked Rupert. "I beg your pardon, Miss Ashleigh; I know you do not approve of my name for your brother."

"I own I prefer the name he was christened," said Grace.

"Oh! nonsense, Grace; I like Pop ever so much better, it takes so much less time to say; besides, it has a delicious twang of school days about it which is refreshing. How was it I got called so first, Rupert? I declare I forget."

"Oh! by one of those outrageously ridiculous round-about ways schoolboys do pick up their names. Your brother's second name is Cannon; well, that's a thing that shoots, so he always went by the name of gun; then, when you came a little chap, they must have something smaller than gun, so you were Pop-gun, and that, of course, was readily made into Pop; and so I, braving, with infinite audacity, Miss Ashleigh's displeasure, have continued to call you."

"And go on, old fellow, to the end of the

chapter; I like it. Will you have a glass of sherry or anything?"

"Thank you, I seldom take anything before dinner. You've never answered my question yet—how is Everard?"

"Oh! I don't know; how is he, Grace?"

"Very well, I think; he is so very busy. I kept the luncheon for him, but he has ordered it now in his room."

"Busy—an old book-worm," said Walter, laughing, "I would'nt muddle my unfortunate brains as he does for a fortune; why, I should go mad."

"What's he studying now?"

"Oh! I don't know, trying to find out if the world is flat or round, as if it would possibly signify to us. We've got to live on it a little while, whatever shape it is, and I don't think it will improve the state of affairs to have our ideas, which we've learnt from childhood—'What is this earth?' 'A

round ball on which we live'—disturbed by such suggestions."

"Yes, there is certainly a great cruelty in doing away with our innocent delusions; we shall want to return to nunneries and monasteries if we are to be assured that the world is not round, and that all our dolls are stuffed with sawdust," said Rupert, laughing. "Can I see Everard before I go?"

"Ask Mr. Everard, Stephens," said Walter, turning to the man-servant who was clearing the table, "if Captain Carrington can see him before he leaves?"

The message returned was that Mr. Everard could not be disturbed until seven o'clock, and then he should be pleased to see the Captain.

"Then he will be deprived of that delight to-day," said Rupert.

"Grace, dear, I'm going to the Manor House with Rupert; do you feel inclined to come?" asked Walter.

"No, thank you, dear," she answered, with that sad, indifferent voice, so painful to hear.

"Well, take care of yourself, little woman," said Walter, kindly; and, kissing her on the forehead, he and his friend set out on their excursion.

"We need not go through the village, need we?" said Rupert.

"No; if you prefer it, we can cross the stile opposite the house, and go over some fields."

"Yes, by all means, that way then; I hate villages, don't you?"

"Can't say I do; don't see why one should."

"Oh! I don't know; they're full of dirty children, and old women, and pigs, and churchyards, and lolly-pop shops."

"Rupert! what a specimen you are. Look there amongst the trees. You can just see the chimneys of the Manor House.

It's not a long walk, is it? Who comes here? Oh! old Poyntz, the schoolmaster, and Dr. Stillwell."

Had Walter glanced at his friend's face, he would have been startled to see its pallor.

"Who do you say?" he asked. "Dr. Stillwell? Who is he when he's at home?"

"Tutor to the ladies at the Manor House."

"Ah! yes—what's that?" and to Walter's infinite astonishment, his friend took a sudden leap over a gate into the next meadow as the two old men approached them. Dr. Stillwell lifted his hat to Walter with a courteous "Good-day, Mr. Ashleigh"; but Poyntz seemed struck with the sudden leap taken by Rupert, and stood, with his hand shading his eyes, looking after him. Walter, laughing, went on calling to Rupert

to come back—that was not the way, and Poyntz, moving on, joined the Doctor, who was many paces in advance.

"Why, Mr. Poyntz," he said, kindly, "did that leap of the young man startle you? You look pale."

"Do I, sir? It was well vaulted. I could do so in my young days. Well done—very well done. Ah!" he said, with a heavy sigh, "I should like to—" and then he stopped, as though his voice was about to break into tears, and walked on in silence.

The good doctor began to speak of other subjects. He felt, with the instinct of his kindly heart, that the poor old man had struck some chord of memory which was too painful to be dwelt on, and strove to lead his thoughts into another channel.

In the meanwhile, Rupert had rejoined Walter, who was, of course, full of curiosity

to know the reason of the sudden exhibition of his leaping powers.

He laughed immoderately—first said he thought he saw a rabbit, and jumped over to see if it was; then that he only did it to astonish Walter; and he could get nothing more out of him till they stood before the gates of the Manor House.

Gertrude had had the pleasure of telling her aunt of the adventure with the stranger, and was standing now with folded arms leaning on the window sill, her bright, merry face resting on them, looking out of the window in a happy state of idleness, having coaxed Dr. Stillwell to put aside work for the day, when she suddenly sprang back, and with her face all aglow, said, "Auntie—Auntie—here he comes."

"He, my love—who?"

"The stranger; he is with young Mr.

Ashleigh. Oh! I must go and tell the girls;" and away she flew to their room to make this wonderful announcement as the young men were shown into the drawing-room; and Auntie, following, was in due form presented to Captain Rupert Carrington.

After some common-place remarks on the weather, the beautiful place, &c., Mistress Medlicott rang a small hand-bell on the table near her, and desired the servant who answered the summons to request that Lady Lilian and her sisters would come into the drawing-room.

"I think, Mr. Ashleigh," she said, "Lady Lilian has some message for your sister, which you will, perhaps, kindly convey to her."

"Certainly, Miss Medlicott; I shall be delighted."

The door opened, and Walter gave a

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sly glance at Rupert as three of the girls entered; but he rose, with perfect composure, and with a grace of manner and ease which Walter thought wonderful as well as beautiful, he bowed to the ladies as their aunt introduced them; and then, turning to poor little Gertrude, whose face, even to the tips of her ears, was crimson, said: "I did not think when I passed you to-day I should so soon have the honour of making your acquaintance."

Walter rose, as Gertrude stammered some answer, and, taking a chair nearer to Mistress Medlicott, addressed himself to her and the other two ladies, May and Edith, leaving poor little blushing Gertrude and Rupert to improve their acquaintance; and he could hear him running on in his bright voice with a flow of conversation which seemed at last to put Gertrude at her ease; and he could hear her merry laugh at his absurd suggestions

through his graver conversation with the others.

"Had not your sister Lilian some message for Miss Ashleigh, Edith?" asked Mistress Medlicott.

"I do not know," said Edith; "I will go and ask her, if you like."

"Can she not come down?"

"She is writing some letters for the post, Auntie dear, I think; shall I go and ask her?" said May.

"Yes, do, my darling, and bring her with you, if you can, to deliver her own message."

Away went the little maiden, and came quickly back, saying Lady Lilian begged to be excused coming down; that her message to Miss Ashleigh was, that the young doves she had promised her were quite old enough to leave the parent, and were ready whenever she liked to send for them.

"Thank you; I will tell my sister. She will be so pleased to have them. How goes on the aviary?"

"Oh! beautifully; will you come and see it?"

"I shall be delighted. The Captain will like to see the Fernery and Orchid houses, I think; should you not, Rupert?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Walter repeated, with half a smile, his question.

"Oh, yes! certainly."

"Where are the keys, Auntie, dear—here?" asked May.

"Yes, love, in the basket on the table. You had better have some shawls and hats, for the Orchid houses are so warm, you will find it quite cold when you come out."

"We shan't hurt, Auntie, dear; we shall not be in them long enough. I can scarcely breathe in them," said Gertrude.

"Strange the objection young folks have to take care of themselves, Captain," said Mistress Medlicott, turning with a smile to Rupert. "You will return to this room, will you not? and you will find some tea, if that is a beverage you can condescend to take."

"I do, Miss Medlicott," said Walter; "but I believe that heathen prefers bitter beer."

"Do not be malicious, Pop; indeed, Madam, I think tea is an admirable invention, and a charming excuse for pleasant little assemblies. You have no idea how I go to the teas in town, and how I am complimented for my singular good taste. The ladies say they can get so few men to come."

"Then you shall have a first-rate cup to encourage your good taste," said Auntie, laughing; and through the conservatory to the aviary, and into the Orchid houses and forcing houses, the young party wandered

along—Rupert keeping up a merry bantering chatter with May and Gertrude, but failing to elicit more than the briefest replies from Edith.

Walter had often essayed making her talk, but had given it up as hopeless. She raised her large, soft, deep blue eyes to his face, answered his questions in the shortest way, and relapsed into silence. It was a cause of incessant banter from her other sisters; but she heeded it not, and still preserved her reticence.

On their return to the drawing-room, they found the tea served in exquisite Sévres cups, each one seeming to deserve a glass case to itself, and they called forth warm admiration from Rupert, who went up fourfold in the old lady's opinion—her china was a great weakness. His admiration led to her shewing him a case of Wedgewood, some Dresden and Chelsea china; so that their

visit extended itself to a length which made Walter think it necessary to apologise.

"Pray do not offer any apology, Mr. Ashleigh," said the dear little lady. "We are pleased to see our neighbours, and only wish that you and your sister would come oftener. She must find it dull when you are in town ?"

"Yes; poor Grace looks forward to seeing me, I think."

"You will tell her about the doves, Mr. Ashleigh, will you not?" said May.

"And she must tell us what she calls them," said Gertrude. "We have named ours Hero and Leander, Beatrice and Benedict, Romeo and Juliet."

"Yes, Mr. Ashleigh; and, would you believe it, Romeo pecked out Juliet's eye," said May, laughing. "They are Gertrude's birds; how badly she must have educated them, must she not?"

"Even the best education will sometimes fail in producing good characters. I cannot altogether consider this Lady Gertrude's fault."

"Thank you, Captain Carrington; I have never heard the last from May of this sad dereliction of duty on the part of Romeo. I know I saw her Beatrice pecking some feathers out of Benedict, and I am sure that was much worse."

"Hen-pecking is a common offence, though, is it not?" said Rupert, with a sly smile.

"Carrington, my good fellow," said Walter, "we really must go, and if you begin an argument with Lady Gertrude, I think I can answer for your getting the worst of it."

"Then I will beat a retreat; discretion is the better part of valour," and, bidding the ladies good-bye, the two young men departed.

They were scarcely outside the door when Rupert gave Walter a tremendous push, and said: "Why, Pop, you're a bigger muff than

I took you for; they're beautiful, every one of them."

"In the first place, my dear fellow," said Walter, as he made an effort to preserve his equilibrium, "you did not see every one of them; and in the second, I do not see why I am to be called a muff because I can see no beauty in the Ladies Murray. They have good skins and fine eyes, but that does not constitute beauty."

"But it goes a long way."

"I admit that; but beauty is perfection; and I do not see it in them."

"Nor will you ever see it on earth, old boy."

"Ah! you have not seen Kathleen O'Brian," said Walter, laughing.

"Oh, stuff! a beauty with black nails and red hands."

"But she has neither, Rupert; on my word."

"Walter," said Rupert, stopping in the road, taking his friend by the arm, and speaking with more earnestness than was natural to him, "for pity's sake do not be led into an unequal marriage. Among the many evils and sorrows of this evil world, more than half of which we bring on ourselves, the one which has in it more of bitterness than any comes of an ill-assorted marriage."

"Halloa, old fellow! bursting out in a new line? have no fear, I'm not a marrying man; I like my own way too well to risk losing it. I like all the nice little girls I see, but I have never yet seen one I should like to bind myself to for life."

"Humph! well, no; I suppose that is a subject for mature consideration," said Rupert; "although, in these enlightened days, we need not be quite so alarmed, for we can advise with our 'future,' as Lord

Dundreary did. If you don't like it, you can go back, you know."

Walter laughed as he answered, "Yes, a very convenient arrangement that."

"They are charming girls," said Rupert, after a moment's pause; "only that beautiful statuesque one won't talk. I should like to make her—I must come down again soon and see you, Walter. I think the country is so awfully jolly."

"I thought you could not bear it—you said so just now."

"Did I? Ah! I often alter my mind."

"So it seems," said Walter. "Hark! there's the gong going for dressing; we shall be late. I am glad the governor's out; if one thing upsets his lordship's temper more than another, it is our being late for dinner."

"Is his temper still as agreeable as usual?" asked Rupert.

"Yes; if anything rather more so."

"What a life for your poor sister."

Walter turned quickly and looked at him as he answered, earnestly:

"She does not mind it in the least, I assure you; she is quite happy in her way; that sad face is natural to her."

"It is very piteous to see, in one so young."

"Really, Rupert, I think you waste your compassion. My sister has nothing to be pitied for," he said, with something of irritation in his manner.

"Forgive me, Pop; I mean no offence," said Rupert, laying his hand kindly on Walter.

"I know; but it's a subject that always rubs my fur up the wrong way," said Walter, with an effort at a laugh. "As far as any cause for sadness goes, I have as much as Grace has, only I don't 'carry my heart on my sleeve for daws to peck at'; here we are.

By-the-bye, old fellow, excuse the apparent impertinence of my question, but considering you had no intention of staying, what did you want with luggage ?"

"A very natural inquiry, my dear Pop. I have, as I have just told you, a faculty for changing my mind, and so I came provided against that contingency—luckily, you see, as it has turned out, for I am going to stay to dinner, and so have my evening 'togs.'"

"I think you must make haste and dress then, for we have only ten minutes, and the cook is hideously punctual," said Walter, as they entered the house.

"I shan't be five," said Rupert, springing up-stairs four steps at a time, "my chignon is so easily adjusted."

He kept his word, entering the drawing-room not a second before the old butler announced dinner.

Everard Ashleigh had come down from

his abstruse studies, and received his brother's friend with his accustomed gentle courtesy.

Rather above the middle height, with a pale, grave face, dark, grey eyes, a superb row of white even teeth, which gave a brilliancy to his sad smile, there was something singularly attractive in the appearance of Everard; but the young ladies were afraid of him, he was "so awfully clever"; and the young men avoided him, he was "so awfully slow." He saw no amusement in racing round a room at a hard galop, with his arm round a young lady's waist; no pleasure in puffing a quantity of smoke into the air, and drawing a large amount into his own lungs; no recreation in knocking some balls through a variety of hoops; or all those different ways of killing time and diverting themselves which those around him delighted in; to him "Life was real, life was earnest." He could not to himself satisfactorily solve the problem

of why man exists here at all, but if it was to fit him for a higher state of existence—a task of probation—to ennoble his mind, to train himself to pure and exalted tastes, must be his plain duty; and a mere frivolous getting rid of time was simply wicked. He taught himself to believe that each moment was to carry its item to the sum total, to be reckoned up finally against him; that "To-day was yesterday returned, returned full power, to expiate, raise, adorn, and reinstate us on the rock of fate;" and he tried to prevent it, "like its elder sisters, dying a fool." With all this, he was gentle and tender as a woman, with a sweet, low voice, with a tremulous vibration in it like a musical instrument. Living in a kind of dream-land of his own, he knew little of the outside realistic world; but he possessed an intense sympathy for suffering and sorrow when it came to his knowledge, and a

chivalry of the old days that, gentle and sweet-tempered as he was, would have roused him to any deed of daring if a woman suffered wrong. He had the truest, warmest love for his pale, sad sister, and loved to have her in his study beside him; though, perhaps, they would scarcely exchange two words—he buried in his books, she quietly at work. The poor around, and their own servants, all loved Mr. Walter—he was "such a nice free gentleman;" but when Everard spoke to them or smiled at them, it was chronicled as an event in the family history; and children, with faces flushed with joy, hastened home to tell mother Mr. Everard had put his hand on their heads and said, "good little man" or "little maid," as the case might be, and would often quarrel as to which of the children the smile had been meant for. Old men and women passed Mr. Walter with a merry, hearty greeting; but the men bared their

heads to Everard, and the women reverently curtseyed, as though they met some superior being.

From his gentle, studious, reserved habits he acquired the name from his brother of "Poor old Everard;" for, to him, a fellow who neither smoked, nor danced, nor played at billiards, nor croquet, nor cricket, was a subject for intense commiseration—what was life worth without its amusement? It was but a slow thing at best; but, as it had to be gone through, let it be as jolly as it could. Troubles and worries would come—it was the fate of man, but a man who was half a fellow would look his troubles full in the face, see which way it was best to bear them, and, that little matter arranged, a cigar in his mouth, and a piano to set his thoughts to music with, Walter was himself again.

Dinner over—which would have been a grave and solemn affair but for Rupert's

merry chatter, and even he at times relapsed into silence and seemed buried in thought—the two friends strolled out into the grounds, and Grace went into the drawing-room with Everard, who liked her to play to him for an hour. They then had coffee; and he went away to his room, appearing no more unless there was company to entertain.

"What time is your train, Rupe?" said Walter; "I must tell Walcott about the dog-cart."

"Do you know, after all, Pop, I'm not sure I shall go," said Rupert; "and if I did, I should walk. I prefer it. And send the porter down for the valise; why, it's no distance."

"Don't go—be quite sure you won't; now you're a much more respectable fellow—go up with me on Monday."

"Yes, perhaps I will; it's no end of jolly here, and we haven't had half a talk. I half

thought of running down to Major Carrington's for two or three days; but I don't think I shall."

"When does your leave expire?"

"Oh! not for another fortnight."

"All right; I shall be delighted to have you, and you may chance to get another peep at your divinities."

"Yes," answered Rupert, in a voice that shewed his thoughts were not altogether with his words. They had sat themselves on a seat outside the drawing-room window, and Walter began whistling the air Grace was playing.

"What a lovely thing that is, and how charmingly your sister plays—better than ever, I think."

"Oh! I don't know; it's not much. You should hear Lady Lilian Murray play; that is something, I can tell you. Why on earth didn't she shew, I wonder, to-day?"

"Is she like the others?" asked Rupert.

"Well, she is like Edith and Gertrude, but on a much smaller scale; for that reason she is to me the best looking. I hate your fine women. If she's in good proportion, with undeniable feet and hands, a woman can't be too small."

"You prefer a Venus to a Juno. Can't say I do; you lose so much grace. I'm of Byron's opinion—I hate a dumpy woman. I think your sister is now the '*juste milieu.*'"

"I don't agree with you there. A girl should be tall or short; I don't like your half-and-halfs."

Rupert laughed.

"How fortunate it is our tastes are so different. It would be most unlucky if we were perfectly agreed on that subject; we might fall in love with the same girl—what a bore that would be?"

"Rather! I'll tell you what, Rupe; we'll go and see little Kathleen O'Brian after church to-morrow."

"No, we won't."

"Why not?"

"Because, my dear fellow," said Rupert, with mock gravity, "I will not encourage you in wrong courses."

"Wrong fiddlesticks!—It's a lovely walk, and a lovely girl at the end of it, and some first-rate bitter to refresh with."

"It's through that cursed village."

"Don't anathematise our parish in that manner, sir.—And it is not through the village—at least, the nearest way is through our own wood here at the end, and over some meadows, wherein is a trout stream that makes your mouth water as you look at it, imagining the 'lusty trout' that are therein."

"Oh! very well; I don't mind. I may as well get it over, for you'll bore my life

out till I've seen this wonderful piece of perfection. Let's go in and hear your sister play, and you give us a song."

"I can't sing a scrap, Rupe. I never do, and I've got a cold."

"Yes; swell tenors always have. Come along!" and he dragged Walter into the drawing-room through the French windows, and begged Grace to make her brother sing.

"Yes; sing, Walter," said Everard, "if Carrington wishes you. I like to hear you, too."

"Do you, old man? Well—come—that is such a compliment that I will reward you in the most ungrateful manner by doing it. And you will find how true it is, that were our wishes always granted, we should sometimes perish at our own request. Did you ever hear a crow with the croup?" he said, placing a song on the piano for his sister to accompany.

"Don't be silly, Pop—go on."

"Well, Grace, let us go in for this, then;" and, in a bright, manly voice, he sang the first verse of a ballad—and then suddenly stopped, and declared it was impossible to do any more; it was something too horrid.

Rupert, who had been standing looking over him, took up the song; and, without accompaniment, sang the second verse.

To describe the effect on his audience is impossible. The perfection of the voice—the intense tenderness of expression—was something they had seldom, if ever, heard equalled.

When he threw the song down, and laughing, said, "That's like my impudence, isn't it?" Walter was the first to find tongue to say:

"You incorrigible humbug! To think I have known you since we were boys together, and never knew you could sing. Give an account of yourself, sir," he said,

seizing him by the lapels of his coat, and shaking him.

"Well, I did not know I could myself, Pop; and I do not know it now. I never was taught; but I am awfully fond of that song, and I've been everlastingly singing it lately."

"And yet, Rupe, it cannot contain your sentiments—'What we have loved we love for ever'—by the specimen you have given me to-day of your changeableness."

"Oh! I never said I was changeable in love, Pop; that must remain to be proved."

A loud ring at the gate bell interrupted the conversation.

"There is the Bashaw," said Walter, and Grace's pale face flushed as she moved from the piano, and Everard rose and said, "Good night," and went quickly out of one door, as his father entered at the other.

"What the devil did Walcott bring out

the grey mare to night for, Walter?" was his first speech on entering the room.

"I haven't the least idea, sir; I'm not in Walcott's confidence."

"Then you ought to have an idea; when I am out you ought to see something decent is sent for me to come home with. I wonder I wasn't smashed; sticking her in the brougham, to come that little distance and wait—of course, imagining I'd a coachman with a grain of sense, and a son who would take some interest in my affairs, I thought the old roan was in the brougham, who would stand for a week, so I finished my hand of whist; and a nice drive home I've had with that beauty. I shall get rid of her to-morrow."

"Better get rid of the coachman who made the mistake, sir, I think; she's a splendid animal; only wants proper work, and more of it."

"Perhaps you'd like to drive her for an hour or two every day. She's pulled my arm nearly out of the socket."

"Will you let me see her, sir," said Carrington, "in the morning? we might have a deal."

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Captain, I thought you were Everard; you said you were not going to stay."

"Nor was I, sir, but—"

"But, somehow," said Mr. Ashleigh, with the customary strange smile, "our fascinations have been too much for you. Well, I can only say you have a hearty welcome. Where's Everard?"

"Gone to his room, father," said Grace, whom he more particularly addressed.

"Tell him to come down again, then; is that the way he entertains his father's guests?"

"Everard considers Carrington is my

guest, sir. I don't think you need disturb him, Grace," said Walter, as she was preparing to obey her father's order.

"Walter, oblige me by remembering this is at present my house; and, therefore, the persons who visit here are my guests. Grace, do as I tell you."

Without a word, she left the room as Rupert said:

"Mr. Ashleigh, it grows late; it is scarcely worth while to disturb Everard; he is far better employed than talking to me."

"My children shall do as I tell them, sir, or they shall not remain under my roof. You, as a soldier, Captain, must surely approve of discipline. Well, where is your brother?" he said, as Grace re-entered.

"He says he hopes you will excuse him; he is deep in some interesting discovery with

his telescope, and he would rather not leave it; it is such a good night for observation."

"I'll smash his telescope, and him too, if he does not do what I tell him," he said, through his clenched teeth, his face growing white with concentrated passion; "he shall come down."

"Oh! father," began poor Grace, lifting her hands imploringly, as he tried to pass her; but he pushed her roughly away, and strided from the room. Grace fell back into one of the ottomans, and, covering her face with her hands, she burst into passionate tears.

Walter went up to her, and, leaning kindly over her, said, gently:

"Don't mind, Grace; Everard will manage."

"But it makes Everard so ill afterwards," she said, through her sobs. "Hark! oh, hark! what is it?" she exclaimed, starting up,

as a loud crashing noise was heard overhead, and a sound as of some heavy body falling.

"Take care of her, Rupert, I'll go," said Walter, with perfect composure of voice and manner, though with a face of deadly pallor; and, as he left the room, Rupert caught in his arms the fainting form of poor Grace.

CHAPTER III.

WALTER walked quietly and firmly up the wide staircase, and as he reached the door of Everard's room, his father came out, and saying, "Go and see to your brother—he was a fool to provoke me," went past him to his own room, and, slamming the door, locked it after him.

Lying back in an arm chair, holding his hand to his head, sat Everard; when his brother entered, the room was in frightful confusion, and the window, before which on a table stood the telescope, was smashed, as though the instrument had been pushed through it.

"Dear old man, what is this?" said

Walter, going up to Everard, and taking the hand lying listlessly on his knee.

"Oh! my father wanted to try a little amusement I objected to; that's all, Walter; he fancied he should like to smash my telescope, and me, I think, after it. The telescope was too many for him—the window suffered, and I fell an easier prey. I don't think my head is cut—it's hard," he said, smiling quietly; "but the contact with the fender was unpleasant, and it aches." He moved his hand as he spoke, and Walter, stooping down to look at his head, exclaimed:

"I should think it does ache; why, you've a bump as big as a cricket ball! Let us ring for dear little Dolly—she'll doctor it."

"Oh, no! better not make a fuss."

"Yes, yes, it must be seen too, old fellow; I wish it had been my head," he said, in a low tone, as with a woman's tenderness he laid his cold hand on the large swelling,

which seemed momentarily increasing. "It might have killed you—it's deucedly near the temple."

"Perhaps it would have been as well, Walter, if it had."

"Hush! hush! old man;" and the rare tears sprang to Walter's eyes, and he turned away and readjusted some of the things in the room.

If there was one being on earth dear to Walter, it was his brother; one person whom he thought superior to any other, who was to be more considered—more humoured—whom it was a personal affront to hurt and annoy—it was this dearly-loved brother; but it was only at such moments as this that it showed itself strongly. It was not Walter's way to make a demonstration of his feelings; and, with a light cheerful air, he turned round as the door opened, and said to the servant:

"Will you send Dolly here, the great

medicine woman? Mr. Everard has hurt himself."

"Mrs. Masham's along with Miss Grace, sir," said the girl; "she's been and fainted away."

"Oh, dear! how very inconvenient of her just now, poor little Grace! Well, please tell Dolly I want her as soon as possible."

"Poor Grace!—did the noise frighten her?" asked Everard.

"I suppose so, and she must have scared poor Rupert; but look here, old fellow, don't you go and follow her example—have you some brandy here?"

"Yes, in my flask," gasped Everard. Without another word, Walter lifted his brother from the chair, laid him on the bed, and, gently raising his head, poured a few drops of the spirit into his mouth, and was chafing his hands, and praying for the speedy arrival of Dolly, when the door opened, and she hurried in.

Somewhat pale was the usually rosy, happy face of Dolly Masham—called Mrs. Masham by the household, and Dolly by the children, whom she had amused and played with when not many years older herself than they were. She had lived in the family ever since, and was now housekeeper and general factotum; called to officiate on every occasion—to share in the joys and sorrows of the children she loved so dearly, and who all declared that it would be impossible to exist without Dolly.

"Now, what is to done here? why, bless my heart!" said the little woman, bustling up beside the bed, "what's the whole family taken to fainting away for?"

"Oh! the old story, Dolly."

"What! that fine temper broke down again?—dear, dear, dear! I'd rather call herrings without my shoes, than have his money, if I was bound to take his temper with it.

Numph! Well, never mind, Master Everard, that will soon be all right. Now you'd have been as proud as a carrot half-scraped of this great bump, if you'd got it at school. Why, you used to show me all your bumps, and thumps, and cuts, when you came home for the holidays—as proud of them as a soldier of his wounds." And as she chattered on, she tenderly bathed the head with cold water; and then, soaking a handkerchief, wrapped it round, and bid him sit still while she fetched some wonderful stuff that she knew would take down the swelling in no time.

On her return, Walter asked her about Grace.

"She is all right now. I've packed her off to bed. I told her she only wanted to faint in that handsome young man's arms. Why, bless you! I'd a good mind to be taken bad myself. There, now, Mr. Everard, I should advise you to go to bed too. We

must shut the shutters, Master Walter, over this broken pane. How do you feel now?" she said to Rupert, after assisting Walter to move the precious telescope and shut the shutter.

"Much better—all right—I shall get up and go to work again, Dolly."

"No such a thing; you have had just as much excitement to-night as you can manage; so don't you let him now, Master Walter."

"Why, according to your own account, Dolly," said Everard, "I have had many such bumps before, and I ought to be used to it."

"Yes, I should think you have had a little half hundred; but they weren't got quite in the same way, you see. Now, you go to bed like a good boy, and I'll shew you a half-penny, as I used to tell you when you was a little child. I'm going to see after Miss Grace now."

"What a good little soul you are, Dolly," said Walter.

"Aren't I? My goodness comes so slow, there's no end to it. I shall look in again the last thing." And away she went, to sit up the whole night in Grace's room, as she invariably did when any of these sad scenes had terrified the poor girl, and left her, in consequence, in a state of nervous excitement that prevented sleep.

Walter went down to Rupert to bid him good night, and apologise for the untoward event.

"I wish sincerely I had not pressed you to stay, Rupe," he said.

"Oh! nonsense; it was fortunate you did, as I was of some little use to poor Miss Ashleigh. Will that irritable party recover himself by the morning?"

"Oh, dear! yes; he will come down as cheerful and pleasant as though nothing had

happened, and speak of the occurrence as though it was a pleasant little joke. Oh, Rupert! that man."

"Hush!" said Rupert, suddenly and earnestly; "he is your father, let him be what he will."

"Yes, Rupert, to my bitter sorrow. Well, good night; we will try and be all better behaved to-morrow."

The sad scene enacted at the Priory contrasted in a strange manner with the peace and brightness at the old Manor House.

The drawing-room was lighted brilliantly with the soft clear light of many wax candles; the moon shining into the conservatory, bathing in its silver light the gorgeous blossoms of the plants which filled it; the exquisite and varied scents coming into the room from the open doors, near which, on a low stool, sat Gertrude, her hands clasped round her knees, listening to Lilian, who,

lying back in a luxurious velvet chair, was reading aloud. In her own especial place, with her work-table and lamp beside her, Mistress Medlicott sat knitting. Edith and May were busy cutting out pictures for a screen they were making; occasionally resting in their work, when some passage of especial interest in the tale made them feel they must give it all their attention.

"Oh, Lilian!" exclaimed Gertrude, at the close of one chapter; "if Amyott dies, it will be disgusting—hateful; I shall want to burn the book."

"My child, my child, not so vehement!" said Auntie; "we do not want such large adjectives about such small things."

"Small things, Auntie; do you call the death of such a hero a small thing?"

"An imaginary hero, certainly, Gertrude, I do."

"But, Auntie, I do not think the heroes

are imaginary," said May ; "I believe—and so, I suppose, Gerty does—that heroes are all at least founded on facts ; the writers have known and loved such, and so I, too, feel a sort of sense of their real existence, and a sorrow if their fate is a sad one, as Gertrude does."

"Oh, dear ! I don't," said Edith ; "the heroes seem to me all the most impossible creatures on earth. I'm sure I've never seen such wonderful beings."

"Oh, Edith!" said May and Gertrude in a breath, "how dare you say so ? Why, who is Amyott himself exactly like ? Lily says so too."

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"Why, Everard Ashleigh," said Gertrude ; "he's exactly like him—just the same sweet, gentle, angel sort of fellow."

"Well, I'm sure, Gertrude," said Auntie, as her sisters all burst into a merry laugh,

"that's a very warm way for a young lady to speak of a young gentleman."

"Well, Auntie, dear," said Gertrude, blushing and laughing too, "I shall not say it before anyone, but I do think Everard is charming. My idea of perfection is gentleness—nothing wrong or wicked can be associated with gentleness."

"Well—am I to go on reading, or not?" asked Lilian.

"Yes, yes; and without wasting more time. You see our hour is nearly over, and Auntie will want her music," said May, pointing to the dial on the mantel-piece. And so Lilian took up the book again and read on until the ruthless author had killed the gentle hero, and poor Gertrude's eyes were filled with tears—tears she was ashamed to show; and, springing from her seat, she flew to the piano, and throwing it open, played a

galop of Schuloff's with more than due attention to the *allegros* and *crescendos.*

"If that is a funeral dirge for your poor hero, Gertrude," said Auntie, when she finished, "it is a very great contrast to him."

"Yes, Auntie, dear; that music is not in your style, is it?" said Gertrude, rising and throwing herself on the ground beside her Aunt. "It was not a dirge, dear; it was my mode of giving vent to my feelings; every hard note I struck, I wished it was on the head of the horrid author, who had the heart to kill my beautiful Amyott. Poor Alice! she will never love again—she could never find another like Amyott."

"She will marry Ernest in the end—you see now," said May."

"Oh! that rattling, empty-headed fellow! impossible, May!"

"He's not empty-headed, Gertrude; and he's so fond of her."

"Well, I would not guess the end; go and play to me, Lilian, love," said Auntie; and, putting down her knitting, she folded her hands together, and, laying back in her chair, prepared herself to listen to her niece's exquisite playing—it was an enjoyment she never liked to miss, and which Lilian never permitted her to do if she could avoid it.

"Look here! what I've been doing, while you have been playing," said May, as Lilian rose from the instrument. "I have written a description of my ideas of perfection—my notion of a hero. Let us each write one. Now, Lily, you go on; here's paper and pens for you all."

"I am saved the trouble; Amyott is mine," said Gertrude.

"But write it down, do, Gerty, and

Auntie shall see, when we are married, who has got her hero ; go on, Lily."

"Oh ! I can't, May. We all like the same thing—someone very good and very agreeable."

"No, no ; but you must particularise complexion, height, temper, talent, manners —everything."

"May is trying to find out secrets, Lilian, I think," said Auntie, smiling ; "but I cannot give up the music just yet."

"No, Auntie ; I will sing whilst Lily writes," and May went to the piano and sang one or two of the Irish melodies her aunt loved, in her rich, contralto voice, which seemed, somehow, in accordance with her brown hair and earnest eyes ; and then she and Edith sang a duet together—the latter possessing a bright soprano, sweet and tuneful, but with less power than May's voice. Still, all this time, Lilian remained with her

pencil in her hand, writing nothing; but Edith and Gertrude had eagerly set to work; and they handed their papers to May, requesting to look at hers in return.

"Edith, you are too ridiculous; it will serve you right if you have such a person. Hark! Auntie, what she has written:—

'His hat is brushed; his hands, with wondrous pains,
Are cleansed from garden mould and inky stains;
His glossy shoes confess the lackey's care;
And recent from the comb shines his sleek hair.'

—you are absurd, Edith. I wanted you to write really what you think nice."

"Well, my dear, I'm sure a nice clean, neat man is very nice."

"Well, take it then, Auntie, and let it bear testimony against her."

"I'll wager she'll marry a slattern," said Auntie, smiling, as she folded the paper up and placed it in her table drawer. "Now for you, May."

"There it is, Auntie."

"Oh! read—read it, May," cried all the girls.

"Lily may read it; she won't write, naughty girl."

They took up the paper, and read:—"He must be VERY tall, with dark, dark hair, and large brown eyes—splendid teeth, and good feet and hands. His temper warm, but generous; his intellect, average good (I hate those awfully clever men); plenty to say for himself, very fond of society, and passionately fond of his wife. If he has no profession, he must have a hobby—one of the arts I should prefer, for I should not care for him either to hunt, or shoot, or boat. I should be in an agony when he was out that he would be brought home on a shutter."

"It's better than Edith's, is it not, Auntie?" said May, as Lily handed up the paper.

"Oh! I shall make no comparisons; now for you, Gertrude."

"Read it, then, Lily. I shall go and hide my face in your lap, Auntie:"—'Courageous beyond all doubt, with the best of courage—the courage to do right; tender and gentle, without the least effeminacy; gentle—the more because he knows his strength, and fears to put it out; clever, so that there is no ordinary subject on which he could not speak, but holding silence when not called upon to speak; for I would have him a better listener than talker, and would rather that he enjoyed good jests than that he should be a good jester. I would have his face serene, and his dark grey eyes shine with a pleasant light always; but his smiles must be rare and beautiful, given chiefly to those he loves. He must be an ardent admirer of music, even if he is not himself a proficient; hold all the arts in highest estimation; and, with a bound-

less sympathy for all human nature, he must weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice, and have an infinite pity for those who sin. I have but little choice of mere external appearance, but the hands must be perfect."

"Oh, Gertrude! well you may hide your face. Auntie, where is this admirable Crichton to be found?"

"An echo answers, 'Where?' I think," said Auntie; "but look up, Birdie. It is quite well to seek for and win excellence—it exalts our own nature, and we have good Penn's advice—not only to see that we love, but that we love only what is lovely."

At this moment, a head peeped in at the door; and Ma'mselle's voice said:

"My Gertrude, the time is ver late for the young eyes."

"Yes, Ma'mselle, I'm coming," said Ger-

trude, jumping up and kissing her Aunt; and she ran away, glad to escape.

An hour after—in the large room, looking out at the glorious moon, which was lighting the lawn like day—Lilian and Edith stood, their arms about each other, Lilian's head on Edith's shoulder—she was fully a head taller than her eldest sister—talking together, as they often did; for they had more in sympathy with one another than the other two lighter-hearted girls. And yet they were a great contrast in all things. Lilian was sensitive to a fault, full of gentle sympathy for everyone, with a rigid sense of duty, which made her the most docile and obedient of pupils; and yet, somehow, the brighter nature of Gertrude made her, with all her wilfulness, more a favourite with both Ma'mselle and the tutor. Lilian was very timid and shy, which was unfortunate in the eldest of the family—so that often the stately,

dignified Edith, with her patrician, self-contained manners, was taken for the older sister. Calm, fearless, and altogether unexcitable, Lilian seemed to lean on her as her support, and admired her, and looked up to her in a pretty, humble way, which was very endearing. And many a time, as now, when her head, with its aureola of shining hair, was resting against her sister's, and her violet eyes gazing up into the calm statuesque face, she looked a sweet touching picture, claiming love and tenderness from all who saw her. Edith was her confidante in all her troubles and worries; but there was one thing that she could not elicit from her, and it was the subject of their conversation now.

"You acknowledge, Lily, that you had a reason for not coming down, then, beside letter-writing?"

"Yes—but, oh, Edith! I cannot even tell you; it is so silly. Do not ask me."

"Tell me one thing. Had it anything to do with Walter Ashleigh?"

"Oh, dear, no!" said Lily, raising her head from its resting-place, and smiling so frankly in her sister's face as to convince her of the truth of her words.

"And you would really rather not tell me?"

"Yes; I would rather not, because it is so silly that I am ashamed almost to think of it myself."

"Well, then, so that it does not worry my poor little sister, I do not mind. My only curiosity to learn it, is to remove it if it pains you."

"Oh, no! it does not *pain* me now. When it does, if it ever does, I will let you know, Edith. I promise."

"Then, I will be content."

"I feel as though I could not draw myself away from that moon," said Lily; "its light

seems to hold me in silver chains. Look at this lovely ray on my dress!"

"I do not love the moon," said Edith; "its light is cold—like a person who is always smiling, and never seems to feel for one. I never could go into fits about the moon; though, I suppose, it's the proper thing to do."

"I do not know about proper; but it fascinates me, somehow."

"I like the sunshine better—it warms my cold nature," said Edith, smiling; "but we must come to bed, Lil. Did Grace send for the doves?" she asked, as they walked, with their arms about each other's necks, into their own room.

"Yes. Poor little thing! I hope they will amuse her."

"Auntie is going to ask all the Priory people to dine next week, Lily."

"*All?*" said Lily, with sudden emphasis.

"Yes. I hope that handsome officer will still be there; though his hair is *not* sleek, certainly."

"Yes—no. Quite the reverse, is it?"

And then the conversation became gradually more monosyllabic and less interesting, and soon the pretty eyes were veiled in slumber.

CHAPTER IV.

It was a bright, hot morning, and the sun was streaming into the library at the Priory, as Mr. Ashleigh entered—with a face as sunny as the morning itself, and with no trace of the past night's storm, as Walter had predicted.

He walked to the window, and looked out on the fair bright scene, whistling an opera air; and as the man entered, bringing in the urn, he said, in the most courteous of tones:

"Stephens, is Miss Ashleigh down?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Masham says Miss Ashleigh is not coming down this morning."

"Dear, dear! Not well?"

"I believe not, sir. Mrs. Masham has taken Miss Ashleigh's breakfast up to her."

"And the gentlemen—are they down?"

"In the grounds, sir, somewhere, I believe. Here is Mr. Walter and the Captain." And as he spoke, Rupert and his friend entered through the French window.

"Good morning, Carrington; the weather smiles on us, does it not?"

"Good morning, my dear boy; have you seen your brother this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is he the worse for our little *fracas?* Silly boy! I believe he would die for that absurd telescope. I suppose you heard the row we made last night, Carrington? I pretended to put the absurd thing out of window; he wished to defend it, and somehow fell with his head against the fender."

Neither of the young men answered, but

Ashleigh, nothing daunted, asked if Everard intended to show, or was he ashamed of his wound?

"No, sir," answered Walter, coolly, "not in the least ashamed—he sees no cause for shame on his part. I believe he will be down in a few moments. Here, Carrington," he said, turning, with a very different voice and manner, to his friend, "sit here. I must be tea-maker; Grace is not down."

"The tea is made, sir," said Stephens, who had just re-entered the room.

"Oh! all right; what have you there?"

"Kidneys, sir, and mushrooms; cold veal and ham, sir, on the sideboard."

"We shall get on, then, Stephens, I dare say. Let me help you, Carrington."

"Thanks; I don't do much in the breakfast line."

"We're too early for you, I suppose; you haven't got up your appetite?"

"A good man always makes a good breakfast, Carrington," said Mr. Ashleigh, coming back to the table with a plate of cold meat he had helped himself to, "which accounts for my excellent appetite," he continued, laughing. Carrington was saved the trouble of a reply by the entrance of Everard.

The young men both rose with a sort of feeling of reverential pity, and an instinctive wish to show the greatest respect to one whom they felt had been so unjustly used, and Walter looked at Rupert as Everard, with the utmost gentleness, wished his father good morning.

"Good morning, my dear Everard; I trust your head is not much the worse this morning for the unlucky rap of last night."

For an answer, Everard raised the thick hair that fell over his forehead, and showed the large, unsightly lump.

"Dear, dear! you and I must not play so

roughly. Give your brother something to tempt his appetite, Walter; be a little attentive to him; he is not so strong as you, and a little matter upsets him; so be so good as to look after him before you attend to yourself."

Perhaps it was as well Mr. Ashleigh did not see the look of withering contempt which his son cast at him; but Rupert did, and noted also the change in his face when he accosted his brother—the tenderness with which he said the words, so simple and off-hand in themselves.

"What shall I get for you, old fellow?"

"Some toast and a cup of tea, Walter, please."

"Not a shaving of ham; not *nothing* else?" he said, smiling, and laying his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Not nothing else, as you grammatically observe," answered Everard, laughing.

"You should not ask people, Walter, when they are delicate, what they will have," said his father; "give it them without asking. You're such a clumsy fellow; so without tact—so—so—"

"So good, and true, and kind," said Everard, holding out his hand to Walter, "that he causes those who know him to have a better opinion of human nature, and makes his brother proud to call himself so."

Walter turned to the sideboard, and began busily carving the ham, and there was silence for a moment; and then Mr. Ashleigh said:

"You will accompany us to our pretty village church, Rupert, I hope. I am particular that we should all—my children, my servants, and my guests—show due respect for the institution of the Sabbath. I never miss attendance at church."

Rupert looked up from his plate with so

comical an expression on his face that Walter was compelled to laugh.

"Have I said anything very witty or clever, my dear boy?" asked his father.

"Oh, dear! no, sir; I was laughing at my thoughts."

"Well, make haste and eat your breakfast, to be early for service; that will be better than making yourself look silly by laughing at nothing."

I am afraid Walter ate with rather more deliberation after this injunction than before, and smiled again as Mr. Ashleigh returned to the attack upon Rupert respecting church.

"Oh, yes, sir! all right—I'll go, of course," he said. "You, poor old man, with the cracked skull—you can't go, can you?" he said to Everard.

"No; I shall not venture this morning; I shall stay at home and take care of Grace."

"A Samaritan duty fitted to the day," said

Rupert. "What time is your service?"

"Half-past ten," answered Walter, "so we must cut this meal as short as possible;" and a slight kick under the table, following these words, prevented Rupert from taking another slice of toast; and the two friends soon rose and left the room.

"I should have been unfit for church, or anything good, Rupe, if I'd stayed in the room with him three more moments," said Walter.

"It is trying, certainly, old fellow; but patience, and shuffle the cards; one glorious thought is—it will end, like all things; it is only a matter of time."

"'True, oh King'—and will you venture into the unpleasant village to church?"

"Yes—the lolly-pop shops will be shut, and the children made clean for Sunday," answered Rupert, laughing lightly. "Will the beauties be there?"

"The Ladies Murray? oh, yes! without fail;

you never told me what you thought of my little pattern of perfection—good Mistress Medlicott."

"A charming little lady—but I am to see the little beauty to-day, am I not?"

"Yes, to be sure; we will go down after lunch."

"Will she not be in church?"

"Not in the morning, I think—besides—"

"If she were, it is not a parade ground for pretty girls, you would say, Walter; we will go in the afternoon. Is your sister ill this morning?"

"Knocked up with last night—these unpleasant scenes always make her ill."

"Poor girl!—but I forgot," said Rupert, smiling, "I must not pity her, must I?"

"Ah! I'll tell you what I mean," answered Walter, "before you go, perhaps; but, if we're going to church, we must start."

Whilst they were getting their gloves and

books, Mr. Ashleigh called Walter sharply: "They should be late, and he hated that."

Walter only said, "All right, sir," and, putting his arm through his friend's, walked slowly after his father, who was going on before them with rapid strides.

"We are in excellent time, sir, I assure you; you need not heat yourself, this sultry morning," he called to him.

"I would rather suffer any inconvenience than be late, Walter," answered his father, and strode on as before.

The sight of a stranger in the Priory pew was, of course, a subject of great interest to the congregation; and he was the subject of conversation to most of them as they walked home, as the Priory people themselves had once been.

"That ere gentleman spoke to me, mother," said one little boy, "yesterday, just as I was a coming home across the meadow behind the school; he asked who old Master Poyntz

was, and what he was, and where he lived."

"Why, you was not along with Mister Poyntz, was you?"

"No; he was on a good way ahead, and he pointed him out, and said, says he, 'What's that old man's name, my lad?' and so I told him; and then he asked, 'Did he live here, and what was he?" and he seemed to me as if he was scared-like at summat."

"Scared-like? what do you mean?"

"Well, he was white in the face, and fetched his breath short; and then he asked, 'Was he going right for the Priory?' and I said, 'Yes.' And I thought, if he was one as was soon scared, he did not ought to go to the Priory."

"He don't look like one as a little would frighten, Johnny—fine, big, handsome feller as ever I see."

"Lilian, he was at church," said Gertrude, running into her sister's room immediately on her return. "I wish you had not had a

headache—he's going to-morrow; he told me so, and now you won't see him, and he's as handsome as an angel."

"We don't go to church, Birdie, to see handsome men," answered Lilian, kissing the bright up-turned face that was looking so eagerly into hers.

"No, of course not. Everard was not there, nor Grace; they were not well, either of them, Walter said. I am so sorry Captain Carrington is going, because Auntie has asked them to dine here on Thursday; and Walter won't be here either—only Everard, Grace, and their father."

"You will be content, at least, Gertrude, with your angel Everard."

"Oh, yes! I like him awfully; he is so quiet and gentle and clever; but, then, if I usurp him, what is to become of all of you?" said Gertrude laughing.

"Dr. Stillwell will do for me; and Auntie

will, no doubt, find an agreeable 'diner out' to take down Edith and May."

"I don't dine, you know," said Gertrude, keeping up the jest; "so I will lend Everard to one of them for dinner; but I must have him all the evening afterwards—that is, if he likes, though. Oh, Lil!" she said, seating herself on the ground—her favourite resting-place—"I can't imagine anyone liking—at least, loving—a person who does not love them; can you?"

"I don't know;" and Lilian rose and fetched her bottle of eau de Cologne from the dressing-table.

"Is your head worse? Let me bathe it, darling," said Gertrude, springing up.

"It aches a great deal; but don't you worry yourself. Hark! there's the gong for luncheon, too."

"Oh! what a nuisance! I wanted a nice talk all to ourselves. Are you coming down?"

"Yes, dear; perhaps luncheon may cure my headache, and then I can go to the afternoon service."

"I will go with you; but Rupert Carrington will not be there; he told me so," said Gertrude, as they walked downstairs.

"Oh! how lovely the weather is!" said Lilian, looking out of the door that led into the garden; "I think it will do me good to go out; we *will* go to church, Gerty." And so they did; and they heard, as they came back from Dr. Stillwell, that old Master Poyntz, had been taken seriously ill after morning service, and he was just going to see him.

Walter and Rupert took their way, after luncheon, as they agreed to do, to see the rustic beauty of Walter's admiration.

"How strange it is that Lilian will not show," said Walter, as they walked along over the meadows. "I made sure she would

be at church; however, you've promised to come again, and then you must see her. They sent a note with Grace's doves last night, asking us all to dine there on Thursday. I'm awfully sorry I can't go; they have such nice sort of dinners—no nonsense and ceremony. We wander about in those lovely gardens, and in the conservatories; and music goes running on all the time; and you have not got to say 'Thank you' after everything; it only seems keeping time with the tinkling of the fountains—the cooing of the doves. It's no end of pleasant!"

"Dear me, Pop! you're poetical," answered Rupert, knocking off the head of a thistle, with violence enough to make Walter say, laughing:

"Who did that unfortunate thistle represent?"

"I really don't know exactly; but I was thinking, I own—"

"Thinking of some one you would like to punish like that thistle?"

"Yes; but is it not an anomaly to feel that you should like to punish the best and kindest friend you ever had in the world—one who for years has had no thought but for your happiness and advancement?"

"Well, that is an odd state of mind to be in. Is that your condition?"

"Yes, Walter, this friend has made me a kind of living lie; and there are times when I feel, almost, that I could kill him—or myself."

"I say, Rupe, old man! this won't do," said Walter, kindly; "I never heard you talk so before."

"No, Walter; it makes me worse, that my tongue is tied; that I cannot tell you—you, my best friend—of the one care in a life that seems so bright, rendering it a living torture, as well as a living lie."

"Try to forget it, man!—now, at any rate," said Walter, walking still with his arm on his friend's shoulder. "If you cannot help or alter it, it is wisest to forget it—at least, to try. You know I have an awful peacock on my wall—what man alive has not? Why, there are people who think Walter Ashleigh is the most fortunate of human beings, and yet he would change places with that contented-looking party there with the dahlia in his coat, who is evidently going to meet his beloved, in the happy conviction that he deserves the admiration he is expecting to receive."

"Has he no peacock on his wall? You said all men had!"

"Yes; but some are less unpleasant than others, and we are apt to think our own the worst—for instance, you are an orphan, poor boy! I am not; but my position makes me envy yours."

Rupert made no answer, though he twice essayed to speak, but seemed to put the words back again; and they spoke very little until they came in sight of a large homestead—a long, gable-ended house—with ricks of corn and hay, in goodly rows; cows and pigs standing knee-deep in the straw-yard; and, on the gate which led to it, a man was seated, smoking his pipe, and watching the animals with all that air of Sunday rest and quiet enjoyment, which those who work hard all the six days generally evince.

"Ah! there's old O'Brian himself. Good day, sir," said Walter, as they neared the farmer's.

"Good arternoon, master. Noice and foine, bean't it?"

"Yes; splendid weather." And Walter held his hand out to the man, who took it in his hard, horny one, and shook it heartily.

"Is Miss Kathleen about?"

"Yes, sir; indoors, I think. Pray walk in; make yourselves at home—there's some of the old tap there, sir," he called after them as they went towards the house.

Walter nodded, and smiled in reply; and, putting his arm through Rupert's, he pushed open the white gate, and then walked into the little garden, with its trim, beautifully-kept lawn—on which the croquet hoops were standing—up the gravelled walk, on either side of which grew luxuriant flowering shrubs; and, ere they could reach the door, a figure stood under the porch, and a bright ringing voice exclaimed:

"Is it yourself, Mr. Ashleigh? Why, sure, we all thought you'd forgotten us."

"You could not suppose that was possible now, Miss O'Brian. Has anyone ever forgotten you that ever saw you?"

"Have done, Mr. Ashleigh, now," said Kathleen, laughing; and, turning graciously

to Rupert, she said, "Pray come in out of this hot sun, sir, and don't be kept standing there while Mr. Ashleigh makes pretty speeches."

They followed her into the summer parlour—so cool and pretty—looking out into the orchard, with its rows of goodly fruit trees.

Rupert and Walter flung themselves into the tempting chairs by the open window, and Kathleen stood leaning against it, refusing the chair Walter offered her.

"I've been sitting all the morning. It's a pleasure to stand; and, may be, you know, I'll grow better."

Of course this elicited another compliment from Walter, and the two went on laughing and warring with words; while Rupert sat contemplating the face and form, which he could not deny were beautiful exceedingly. She was rather above than below the middle

height; a small, perfectly-shaped head, set well on her shoulders, with rich sunny hair, a shade between gold and light brown, which was wavy by nature, not made to be so by its owner; eyes of the deepest, darkest blue, shaded by large black lashes, which lay on the cheeks that broke into dimples each time she spoke; and a mouth, which all the beautiful descriptions that ever were written could not too much extol—so small—so rosy—so perfect in its repose—so brilliant when the ruddy lips parted in a smile, shewing the white rows of ivory over which they had been closed. She stood here, as I have said, leaning against the window; her hands—brown from her rustic employment, but beautifully shaped, and clean enough even for Rupert's fastidious taste—in her apron pockets: a little conceited apology for an apron, made of white muslin, trimmed with goffered lace; her

dress—a pretty chintz pattern, the front short enough to shew the neat little booted feet, crossed one over the other; and, resting on her shining hair, the sauciest little cap, with a spice of cherry ribband in it; and, as he looked at her, Rupert was forced to own that Walter *was* right, and that such beauty was not often seen.

"And now," she said, after some little time, "I suppose you'd like a draught of beer, this hot day?"

"Indeed, we should," said Walter; "and then, will you shew us over the farm?"

"Sure, I will. We've a perfect picture of a cow to show you—pure white—with a little calf by her side, the very moral of her."

"White, too?"

"Yes; white as the driven snow, the two of them."

"Delightful! My friend is an out-and-out judge of cattle," said Walter, laughing.

"'Deed, then, he'll be satisfied," said Kathleen; and away she went for the beer.

"Well, Rupe, what do you say?" asked Walter.

"Say!" said Rupert, stroking his moustache, and speaking very deliberately; "that I could make as good a woman out of a turnip any day."

"Brute!" said Walter, jumping up and tapping him on the head with his cane. "I should like to serve you as you did the thistle."

"Don't get excited, Pop; and, if you'll promise to be calm, I don't mind telling you I think she's, without exception, the prettiest thing I ever saw."

"Well done, you! You shan't be 'thistled.' Hush! here she comes."

Rupert sprang from his seat as she entered, and took from her the tray she was carrying.

She acknowledged his courtesy with one of her radiant smiles; and, turning to Walter, she said:

"My grandfather would like to come round the farm with you. He would like your friend's opinion of the cow."

"Oh! Miss O'Brian, I beg you will not believe Mr. Ashleigh. I am sorry to say I am no farmer or grazier—the only animal I have the least understanding of is a horse," said Rupert.

"Ah! then we can please you, sir, there; for our team is reckoned the finest in the county. Will you come?"

They followed her out into the garden, where the old man stood awaiting them. He delighted in Walter; for he, to please the old man, always expressed such a warm interest in everything connected with the farm, remembering the names of the horses, to the great delight, not only of the farmer himself,

but the waggoner's mates, who received him with broad grins of welcome. And so they walked on together, and Rupert and Kathleen came on at a slower pace; Rupert bending down to look into the exquisite face, and watch its expression—wishing the horses at the bottom of the sea when he was called from her side to admire them. He, however, gave his opinion on their merits with all the air of a connoisseur; and then, again returning to the side of the little beauty, he asked what her favourite amusements were, and how she passed her time? and she gave him such ready answers, with her bright smile lighting her eyes, that he knew not how the moments passed, nor stopped to wonder what had become of Walter, though he had been long out of sight. At length, his voice calling him roused him, and he said:

"Ah! I must go, Miss O'Brian. That

provoking fellow is in an awful hurry. And we cannot be hindering you on Sunday, can we ?"

"Oh, dear, no ! not in the least—it's a happy rest day."

"A very happy day—I shall never forget it," said Rupert.

"Won't you, now ?" said Kathleen, laughing, and blushing too ; for the tones were very earnest in which Rupert had spoken. "Oh ! I think there's no memory in the world that's so short as a young man's."

"Surely you do not speak from experience."

"Not exactly ; yet I've made it a rule to have as little to do with them as possible."

"How cruel ; you must have made many hearts very sad."

"Oh ! I hope not," she said, raising her eyes to his face, but looking at him earnestly and seriously, without a shade of the pretty

coquetry of her former manner; "I was early taught that playing with hearts was very dangerous; and I saw too much of its misery to need more warning."

"I beg your pardon, Miss O'Brian," said Rupert; "I was jesting; I did not dream I should awaken sad thoughts;" for in the sweet eyes he could see two tears trembling.

"Ah! no. How should you dream of it? Look! Mr. Ashleigh is coming to see for you."

"Rupert, I've been halloaing at you for a week; are you going to stay here for ever?"

"Alas! no," said Rupert; "I am ready (I cannot say willing) to go, when you are."

"Come along, then; the cow and calf are perfect, Miss O'Brian. I suppose you will name them."

"La bless you! yes, sir," said the farmer,

laughing; "Katty gives the creatures a name the moment she sets eyes on them—they're called a'ready, 'Snowdrop' and 'Snowball.'"

"I fancy the creatures like it," answered Kathleen, laughing. "It makes them feel at home to be called by some name."

"Don't you think they would come to us just as readily, and be quite as well pleased, if we called them 'dog dog,' 'cat cat,' and 'cow cow?'" said Rupert, with a gravity which made his words seem more ridiculous.

"No, I don't. They would doubtless answer to your call from the sound of your voice; but it distinguishes them from one another, which it is my fancy to believe they like, and which, any way, endears them more to me. I never name the animals that have to be sacrificed—I should'nt mind saying a pig, a lamb, or a calf is to be killed to-day; but I wouldn't like to say so of Sally, or Fanny, or

Snowball; it would be like talking of the murder of my friends."

"Noa, noa," said the farmer, with a little chuckling laugh; "Katty never will neame 'em till she's sure they're to be brought up."

"This calf, then, is to be named Snowball?" said Walter.

"Yes; for she's so handsome and well bred, I am a-going to bring her up," answered the farmer.

"Poor things! if they only knew how much depended on their beauty," laughed Walter.

They had strolled on to the lawn, and were standing by an arbour over which a honeysuckle was climbing, laden with its perfumed blossoms.

"How delicious!" said Rupert; "I think it is the sweetest scent of all the flowers."

Kathleen pulled a piece growing near her,

and placed it in her dress; and they all walked on to the little white gate, Rupert and Kathleen still together, and then, thanking the farmer, and bidding him and his grandchild "Good bye," the young men left the farm, and walked on across the field, turning once to see the graceful figure of the girl leaning against the white gate. They lifted their hats and waved them to her, she returning it with a gentle movement of her beautiful head; and they went on some time in silence, till Walter, turning suddenly to look at his friend, said:

"You rascal! did she give it you?"

"She did," said Rupert, quietly.

"Ha! ha! Rupe; for pity's sake, do not be led into an unequal marriage, among the many evils and sorrows of this evil world—one which has in it more of bitterness than any other ill, &c. Do you remember that sermon, preached to one Walter

Ashleigh by his good friend, Rupert Carrington ?"

"Don't prove Darwin's theory, and show your apish descent, Pop," said Rupert, laughing. "Because a pretty little girl gave me a piece of honeysuckle, am I obliged to marry her ?"

"By no means ; but I'm tickled by the great philosopher being caught in the toils. I knew how it would be, and all I want you to do is, to do me the justice of acknowledging I was right, that's all. She is the most extraordinary girl I ever saw—her refinement, as well as her beauty, is so extraordinary. Do you know she writes poetry ? and it is really very fair too ; I should never have seen it, but the grandfather and grandmother are so proud of her—they showed it me."

"The grandmother did not appear," said Rupert.

"No, she was over in the village, with old Poyntz, the schoolmaster—he's ill."

"Ill, is he?" said Rupert, with a slight start; "what's the matter with him?"

"Oh! I don't know, I'm sure. I say, we must step out; it's getting late, and the governor will be disturbed in his mind."

They hurried on, and spoke but little until they reached the Priory; and then Rupert said, as he entered the house:

"I shall have a better opinion of your taste for the future, Pop."

CHAPTER V.

In the little bed-room of the pretty schoolhouse—the windows round which the roses clustered that the poor schoolmaster loved to tend—the old man himself was seated in an arm chair, propped up with pillows. Beside him, holding his hand, sat Dr. Stillwell. He had not left the old man from the moment he had heard of his illness, and now the daylight was fading, and yet he would not go—he did not think his old friend was well enough to leave him.

"Please, sir, go home now," urged Master Poyntz; "I am quite well again now. It was only a dizziness. I am getting on in years, and must expect to feel weaker and

weaker. The school was full this morning, and the fuss of getting the little ones under weigh, in this hot weather, was too much for me. Go home, dear sir, and get your supper comfortable."

"No, no; I am in no hurry for supper. I should like to see you into bed first."

"Yes, sir; true, I thank you;" and then the eyes had the strange look in them that had made his kind friend anxious; and he whispered, pointing with his trembling finger to the sky, in which one bright star was glittering: "She sees me, I believe—always she sees me, and is sorry for me. Don't you think she does, sir? Is it wicked, I wonder, to think so, sir?—is it wicked?" he asked again eagerly.

"Oh, dear, no!" answered the Doctor, gently; "nothing is wicked that enables us to bear the dispensations of God patiently and bravely. The idea that those loved

ones who have gone before are permitted to watch over us on earth is a most comforting belief, given in mercy, I believe, to such natures as would be scarcely able to bear their bereavement without it."

"Yes. Thank you; now I'll go to bed, and you will not be uneasy about me. You know, sir," he said, rising with some difficulty from his chair, "I must give up my school; that's what I must do. I can't manage them; poor little chaps! they're very good, but the noise and the confusion is too much for me. I must see the vicar to-morrow, and tell him so."

"Well, yes; we will see in the morning. Let me get you to bed now."

He seemed to fall quickly asleep, once in bed, and Dr. Stillwell crept away, requesting the schoolmistress to attend to his bell instantly, if it rang (for, by the kind thoughtfulness of the vicar, a bell of communication

was placed behind the two schoolhouses in case of any night alarm). But the Doctor made up his mind to induce his old friend to have one of the elder schoolboys to sleep with him the next night, if he were no better.

Early the next morning, after a very hurried breakfast, Walter and Rupert started for the train.

"You must remember me kindly to your sister, and wish her good-bye for me," said Rupert, as he jumped into the dog-cart, to Everard, who was standing on the steps, watching them away.

"I will—stay; she is here," he said; "come to say good-bye herself. Why, Grace," he continued, as she appeared at the door, "we did not think to see you so early."

She muttered some reply, and held out her hand to Rupert, who had descended again from the cart to speak to her.

"What did you want to fuss yourself into getting up for, Grace?" said Walter, with some annoyance in his voice. "I came to your room because I thought you would not come down."

Again she murmured some reply, in which "my father" was all that was audible. She was very pale, and her eyes were red, as though she had been crying.

"Good-bye, Miss Ashleigh," said Rupert, with a tenderness in his voice and manner, born of pity for one who, though so young, seemed always so joyless. "I shall see you soon again. Walter says I'm to come again, often; and there really is so much attraction here that I don't want much pressing."

"Come along, Rupe—we shall be late," said Walter, impatiently.

Shaking her hand again, Rupert sprang back into his place beside Walter, and they

drove away, Rupert looking back as they passed through the gate; but Grace had gone in and closed the door.

They then drove on a little while in silence, and then Walter said:

"Rupert, I've something awfully disagreeable to say to you. I've been trying to do it ever since you have been with us, and I've never been able to get it out. You know a fellow can't help having a 'cad' for a father."

"What!" said Rupert, turning fiercely round, and looking searchingly in his friend's face.

"Well, I know it's wrong to call one's father names; but, 'pon my word, mine tries me more than I can say."

"Oh! ah! yes, poor fellow!—go on," said Rupert; "what is it now?"

"Well, of course, it's a horrid bore to me having to speak to you on such a subject;

but we're old enough friends to excuse anything, aren't we, Rupe ?"

"Oh ! cut that—and go on," said Rupert, laughing.

"The fact is, my father, Rupe, has taken a fancy that you will make an excellent husband for poor little Grace ; and, in the coarsest way, throws her at your head, as it were ; she sees it herself, and her delicate, sensitive nature shrinks from it painfully. She has no love in her heart but for one ; her whole thoughts and affections are engrossed by one object, and she will never marry. It is only fair to tell you this—more for her sake than yours, for I suppose you can have no feeling for a poor, miserable, plain little thing like her ; but pity is akin to love, and sometimes leads to it."

"My dear fellow, I'm glad you've eased your mind by speaking to me," said Rupert. "I can tell you, in answer, that, though the

unnatural sadness of your poor sister has excited my compassion, I have really not thought of her in any way which can affect my peace, and I have not noticed what you complain of."

"I am glad of that; I was afraid you had. Why, this morning, my father made her come down to wish you good bye. I heard him ordering her to dress—poor girl! such things are so painful to her."

"I had better not come down again, then," said Rupert.

"Oh, yes! if you are warned—that was all I wanted. I did not wish her, poor thing! to lose your respect; and if you are heart-whole, all is well."

"Then you don't want me for a brother, even if I desired it?" said Rupert, smiling.

"My dear fellow, you know better than that; but, as I have said, Grace is engrossed by one love; she will have no other."

Rupert, of course, asked no questions as to who or what this love was. He felt that he had no right to tempt Walter to betray his sister's confidence; but his curiosity was somewhat aroused—he could but imagine some hopeless affection was the cause of the sadness he had so pitied.

"I hope she'll be all right and jolly some day," he contented himself by saying. "And now, I have something to say to you: Don't let that poor old schoolmaster want for anything, now he's ill. I was up awfully early this morning, and strolled down to ask after him. They say he's very bad; and I should think the poor old fellow's overworked himself; so he must have wine and good things. Spend this for him, will you?" and he pushed a note into Walter's hands.

"But, my dear boy, I shan't be down again until Saturday," said Walter.

"No, I know you won't; but you can

drop a line to your sister, and ask her to see him, will you?—only, I don't want my name mentioned; do it yourself, you know. That's why I spoke to you."

"What a queer chap you are, Rupert; but Grace will wonder why I'm so suddenly interested in old Poyntz."

"Oh! tell her that you have fallen on a friend of his, who's much interested in him, but does not wish his name known; or I can send it him direct, anonymously, if you think that better. I should have done so, but they told me the poor old fellow's head was queer, and I feared he would be none the better for the money, when he was not able to spend it for himself. So I thought you would manage it."

"Rupe, I believe you are one of those who 'do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame.' How kind of you to think about a poor old fellow like that. There is some-

thing interesting about him, I think, myself. Dr. Stillwell is so fond of him—they are always together, which shows the poor old man has something in him—for Stillwell is awfully clever ;" and, all the way to town, Walter's thoughts returned often to his friend's act of benevolence, and he felt increased love and admiration for him; pleased to find how little he was altered from the generous lad at school, whose well-furnished purse was at anybody's service ; who never heard a case of need but he was ready to help—never saw a subscription raised for some suffering or distress, but his name headed the list.

The friends parted at the London terminus —Rupert going to his quarters, and Walter to the War Office, in which he had a situation. His father wished him to give it up, as there was no need for him to work—he said, proudly, he could place all his children

in independence, without their moving a finger—but Walter preferred being employed. Had his home been a much happier one than it was, he would not have cared to stay there doing nothing; and so he contented himself with his weekly visit from Saturday till Monday, and had rooms at the West-end, where the good old landlady spoiled him as much as she would have done a child of her own.

The girls at the Manor House had just left the schoolroom, where, after Gertrude had finished her studies, they had been chatting with Dr. Stillwell, hearing about poor old Master Poyntz, and other village matters —for Gertrude always saucily informed him that she expected him to be the Haseley Mere Gazette, or local Intelligence—and, taking their garden hats, had strolled out on the lawn, when the clatter of horses' hoofs and the barking of dogs in the stable-yard proclaimed an arrival.

"Why, who is that, I wonder?" said May.

"Some one to lunch, I suppose," said Lilian.

"Oh! not Sir Percival Travers, I pray," said Gertrude; "he is the most awful old bore."

"Gertrude! gently," said Lilian; "do not express yourself so strongly—it is not pretty in a little girl like you."

For all answer, Gertrude went up to her sister, and, with a rogueish smile, stood close to her. She was full half a head taller than her little monitor.

"You foolish thing!" said Edith, who had been employing herself by gathering a bouquet to wear at dinner; "Lilian means little in age and sense."

"Gerty knew what she meant fast enough," said May; "that was only sauciness; look! look! see who it is!" she said, in an excited

voice, her face brightening in colour as she spoke.

"Ah! Duchess," said Gertrude, in a laughing whisper, as a young man, in high riding boots, carrying a whip in his hand, and followed by a large retriever, walked towards them.

The new arrival who had produced this little excitement amongst the ladies was sufficiently attractive to deserve it; for, without any pretension to being an Adonis, there was an air about him which bespoke his patrician origin, and an appearance which might excuse "gushing" young ladies, who would have had no objection to be styled "your grace," calling him awfully handsome. He was very pale, with jet-black hair and eyebrows; his eyes themselves a deep dark blue, in some lights seeming black; his hair was very long, which he had a knack of carelessly tossing back with his very white

long fingers. Such was his Grace the Duke of Claverton, who, advancing to the ladies, after the customary salutations, said:

"I am staying at Oakdean, and have taken the liberty of riding over with young Prescott," he said. "Mistress Medlicott is so hospitable, I feel sure she will not turn us out."

"Certainly not," answered Lilian, with her gentle, gracious manner; "my aunt is always pleased when our neighbours treat us without ceremony; but where is Mr. Prescott?"

"He would see his cob attended to, and I believe he is looking at your horses; he was such an age, I came on in front of him. I'm afraid you may think him a bore—he's so awfully funny—and always at it, you know—and brutally restless; he bores me frightfully; if he does you, tell me, and I'll kick him. Oh! I often do, I assure you," he said, answering a little murmured remonstrance

of Gertrude's. "A joke or two is very well after dinner, but when a fellow begins in the morning, before one's eyes are wide open, there's nothing for him but kicking."

"I should think Mr. Prescott is glad when your visits terminate," said May, laughing.

"No; on the contrary, he's like a spaniel: the more I kick him, the better he likes me. Oh! here he comes at last. Prescott, allow me to introduce you to—but, ah! perhaps you have been introduced?"

"Only I have had that pleasure," said Lilian, advancing and offering her hand to Mr. Prescott. "My sisters were not at home when Sir John and his son called."

"Then allow me to present you," said the Duke, "Lady Edith, Lady May, and Lady Gertrude Murray."

Acknowledging, with a very graceful bow, this introduction, Prescott turned and said

something to his friend, for which he received a sharp tap with his riding whip.

"Now, Syd, be quiet, do."

The boy, for he was not much else, laughed out with more heartiness than was quite consistent with conventional good breeding; and then they all followed Lilian to the drawing-room, and told Gertrude to find Mistress Medlicott.

The door opened at the moment, and the old lady entered.

"Ah, Duke! I'm glad to see you; and you," she said, extending her other hand to young Prescott; and there was a look and tone of peculiar tenderness in her greeting of him. "You grow more and more like your great uncle."

"Awfully good-looking chap he must have been," said Prescott, pulling up his shirt collar with an air of affected conceit.

"He looked good, which was better," she

answered, gently; "and now," she added, "you have come to lunch with us, of course?"

"If you please," answered the Duke, "and if Prescott will behave himself; but he's an inveterate punster, and he'll make our luncheon disagree with us, if he goes on as usual."

"High spirits befit his age," answered the old lady, smiling; "and we live so quietly, that a little rousing will do us good."

Could Bertie Alleyne's nephew do wrong in the eyes of Mistress Elizabeth Medlicott?

And as they went to luncheon, and through the whole meal, he ran on with an amount of nonsense, at which they were obliged to laugh without ceasing; and Gertrude said, when they all went out to see the grounds, that he really was the most charming fellow she had ever seen, although he had nearly killed her.

They left the old Manor House, engaged to

dine there on the Thursday, to meet the Ashleighs.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and the girls, having deposited their candles in their own rooms, came back to the large one, where, through the bow window, the moonlight streamed out on the floor; and, standing with their arms about each other, they prepared for a long chat. Ma'mselle had gone to bed early, with a headache; so they thought they were quite safe from intrusion, and they could have what they so enjoyed, and what May called a thorough good gossip.

"How soft the moonlight sleeps upon that bank—sit, Jessica," said May, smiling, and pulling Lilian down on to the couch near the window.

"If we sit down, we shall never go to bed," said Gertrude. "The only chance of retiring before cock-crow, is to stand till one's legs

ache ; " and, as she spoke, she threw herself on the ground at her sister's feet, and laid her head in her lap. The girls all laughed.

" Consistent child," said Edith, " is that the way you set us an example ? "

" Well, you know, I have not the least objection to sit up all night ; I am not at all sleepy, and it's very cosy here ; " and Gertrude drew the little white hand Lilian had laid on her head down to her lips, and kissed it.

" How well his grace looked to-day, Lil, didn't he ? " she said. " May, you must really be the Duchess. I shall be proud of my brother-in-law ; and it is imperative one of us should marry him."

" Hush ! hush ! Gerty, darling," said Lilian, " you are too fond of talking such nonsense."

" Nonsense, Lil, dear ?—since when has love and marriage been nonsense ? "

"Since the very beginning," said Edith, with a proud toss of her regal-looking head. "Men and women, too, have committed more folly for love, and made themselves greater fools in marriage, than in any other way. I think, to paraphrase an old saying, 'When love comes in at the door, sense flies out of the window.'"

Lilian smiled gently.

"Why, Edith; though you speak rarely, you speak severely."

"I believe," said May, "that Edith silently observes us all, and stores up severe remarks to censure all the follies and weaknesses she is so far above herself; but, take care, Miss —we shall catch you tripping some day."

"But, May, do tell us, will you be the Duchess of Claverton?" persisted Gertrude.

"It is not fitting May should answer that question to any but the Duke himself, Birdie," said Lilian.

"No, nor will I, Lilian," said May, "you may depend on it."

"We shall have a pleasant party on Thursday, I think," said Edith.

"Yes—but who is to be the tenth at dinner? I can only count nine, as you cannot have the happiness of my company," asked Gertrude.

"I don't know; are there only nine?"

"No, see—Mr. Ashleigh, Everard, and Grace, the Duke, Mr. Prescott, Auntie, and you three girls."

"The Doctor or the Vicar will be the tenth, I suppose: they are always our last resource."

"But we can't have the Vicar without the Vicaress. How very stupid of that handsome officer to take himself away."

Lilian moved her hand from Gertrude's neck, and said:

"We really must not begin on this

subject, or we shall stay up till cock-crow, as Gertrude predicts. Come! let us go to bed. You must go, certainly, Birdie."

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! how glad I shall be when I'm grown up, and do exactly what I like," she said, rising from the ground, preparatory to obeying her sister's orders.

"Ah, Birdie!" said Lilian, as she kissed her; "take care you never sigh to be a child again."

"I'm sure I never shall. Good-night, girls—don't be long."

"No; we're coming in a moment."

"Good night, May."

"Good night."

"Are you not going to kiss me? Are you cross, May?"

"Cross? No—nonsense. Must we be always cross if we're not hugging and kissing, and on the broad grin?"

Gertrude made no answer—only whispered,

as she passed Lilian, "What has put her out?"

"I don't know. Your allusion to the Duke, I think—she does not like it," Lilian answered, in the same tone.

Gertrude shrugged her shoulders; and, once more bidding them good night, she went into her room.

Then Lilian came to May, and said, gently: "Nut-brown maid, what is it? What has vexed you?"

"Gertrude's folly. She's a silly, spoilt thing, and she ought to be punished. She'll be making us all ashamed some day, with her nonsensical remarks."

"Gertrude has more tact than you give her credit for," said Edith. "She may jest and laugh when we are alone; but she will never say anything stupid, depend on it."

"But it is very wrong to let her

talk so; and if she does it again, I will tell Auntie — tiresome, aggravating little thing!"

"Well, let us go to bed now. Oh, May! you cannot feel angry with that sweet moon looking at you?"

"I've no such adoration for the moon as you have, Lilian. It is, to me, like some poor characterless thing that has not pluck enough to take her own part. She seems so idle, too, sailing about there, quite satisfied to look at her fair face in every stream and river, and doing nothing else. I love the sun, that does its work so bravely—makes the flowers blow, and ripens fruit, and warms and cheers us all."

"Oh! what a long speech, May; you're so eloquent when you are angry," said Edith, yawning.

"Angry! it's enough to make anyone angry," she answered petulently; "and,

rely on it, if Gerty begins that subject again, we shall quarrel."

"To-morrow, May, dear, we will talk about it," said Lilian, softly. "Let us say no more to-night. Good night."

"Good night."

"I wanted to talk to you again on the old subject," said Edith, as May left the room. "I *do* so want to know, Lilian; for I fancy I have guessed," she whispered.

"It is useless to ask me, dear," said Lilian, blushing, and smiling with a half sad smile; "I *cannot* tell."

"Oh, dear! it is very tantalising. Well, then, let us to bed."

CHAPTER VI.

"Ah! my dear Rupert—how are you? You did not expect to find me in town?"

"I did not, indeed, uncle; and should have called, but I met Compton in Bond Street."

"Well, sit you down—sit you down, now you are come, and tell us where you hail from."

"I have been down to see an old school-chum at Haseley Mere. His father has bought a beautiful place, and I have never managed to go and see it before; so I thought I would run down for a day or two."

"Quite right, my boy!—quite right! but a day or two is enough to spend in the

country. Wretched place! Only fit to harbour sheep, and turnips, and pigs, and—and all those kind of things."

Rupert laughed.

"Well, I should not like, I think, to pass my life in rural solitudes; but it is very lovely, and one might exist in such a place as Mr. Ashleigh's for some considerable time."

"Pretty girls, there, you dog—eh?"

"Not exactly at the Priory; Miss Ashleigh has no pretensions to beauty; but there are some lovely ladies in the village. Doubtless, you know them—the Ladies Murray, daughters of the late Duke of Claverton?"

"Claverton—oh! yes, of course. He married a Miss Medlicott. I knew the Medlicotts years ago. I used to meet them at the Earl of Beauwater's. Yes; that is the same family. The Duke and Duchess are both dead, and their aunt—Mistress Medlicott, as

she appears to be universally called—takes charge of them. Ah! yes!—I know, I know. A pretty, bright thing she was, like a ray of sunshine. No one knew why she remained Mistress Medlicott; but I suppose she did. And they're good-looking girls, are they?"

"Very—at least, the three I have seen—the eldest did not come down the day I called. They seem to disagree with us about the country, uncle, for they only come up to town for three weeks in the early part of the season, and then fly back to their beautiful home; and, really, it is beautiful; and they look so charming, walking about in the grounds, adding another beauty to the countless ones around, like a group of fair flowers—fair as those that grow there in boundless profusion."

"Dear—dear! Have you left your heart amongst these flowers, sir—eh?"

"No, uncle; I think not; but what made you so soon tired of the grouse?" said Rupert, laughing.

"Oh! it was too hot; and I wanted to get back. I'm like a fish out of water down there. I wish I'd never bought the place; and, but for you, would sell it, Rupert."

"My dear uncle, pray do not let me, or any thought for me, prevent your doing as you like. I owe you enough already—more than I can ever repay."

"Don't mention it, boy!—don't mention it! You will repay me by being a gentleman, in word and deed; keeping yourself from low connexions and acquaintances; following your profession with diligence—I ask no more at your hands."

Rupert was silent; but a look of deep pain had crossed his face as his uncle spoke, and at length he said, with some effort, "Do

you still send the money to Daveney Common, uncle ?"

"Send the money ? why, of course I do. Am I a man to break my word ?"

"No, no, uncle ; but I mean still to the same address ?"

"Yes, of course ; why ?"

"I fancied I saw the recipient of your kindness at Haseley Mere."

"You did, Rupert ; you have not broken your word ?"

"Uncle ! have you not made me a gentleman?" said Rupert. "But, ungrateful, as it seems, to say so, it has been at such a sacrifice, that I would rather be a plough-boy."

"Rupert ! you surprise and pain me," said Major Carrington.

"I fear I do ; but I can hold my peace no longer ; I feel so base—so worthless."

"Why should you ?" said the old man, striving to be calm. "You have been, as it

were, forced to take this course. It is not your free will; you are doing a good thing for yourself, from which no harm can arise—comforting my declining years; soothing the latter end of a life that has been anything but a bright one. Do not say you wish it otherwise. You would not so disappoint me, after all."

Rupert had sat with his hand covering his face during this speech; at its conclusion, he said:

"No, sir; I suppose I must bear it to the end; but I could not resist telling you that it is a bitter pain and grief to me."

"Bear it to the end! and when I am in the grave, and you are enjoying the fortune I shall leave you, will you *then* undo all I have done, and go back to the scenes from which I rescued you? Rupert—can you mean this? Answer me, sir!" said the old man, with vehemence.

"I cannot tell what I shall do," said Rupert; "we none of us can say what our course will be a year, a month, a day hence; we are tools in the hands of a Higher Power, I know, and for some wise purpose I teach myself to believe. He has ordered this, which is to me so hateful."

"Hateful! hateful! sir, is it?" said the old man, rising and walking excitedly up and down the room; "hateful to be the petted child of an old man with more money than wits, perhaps; to have no wish or whim ungratified; to be in a position that gives you an *entrée* to the best society of Europe; to have had the education of a gentleman—of a nobleman, if you come to that; this is hateful, is it? very good; go then—leave me; go back to the dirt I took you from; and I, sir—I will try to forget your existence, and leave my money to some d—d hospital. Oh, Rupert!" he exclaimed,

suddenly turning to him, and extending his arms to him. "My boy, with my Alice's face—you could not have the heart to use me so!"

"Uncle, you try me sorely! You know I could not go back to the old life," said Rupert, in a voice which trembled with emotion; "but if you would only alter one stipulation—let me see and own—"

"Impossible! impossible! Rupert. Alice made the choice; time was given for the decision; it was made, and it is irrevocable; either go from me at once, never to see me again, or go on as we now do. I thought I had suffered enough on this subject, but it seems to pursue me."

"Well, well, sir," said Rupert, rising and coming to the side of the old man, who was trembling with agitation, "I must say no more now; but in pity leave me to act as my conscience directs, when it can no

longer pain you. I will only ask this—think it over, and make my life less burdensome to me, by your consent. I have business, and must go now; forgive me, dear uncle, for having thus worried you, but I felt I must speak. Good bye, for the present—shall I come in in the evening?"

"As you will—as you will. His life burdensome! The life I have sheltered so carefully for her sake," he murmured, "that her son should live to tell me I have made him wretched!"

Rupert took his hand and shook it warmly, but his uncle gave him no responsive grasp; and when the door closed on him, the brave old soldier, who had borne the brunt of many battles, faced so many times danger and death undaunted, covered his face with his hands, and burst into tears.

Rupert did not go back in the evening; a

friend, whom he had not seen for some time, pressed him to dine at his club, and when he reached his quarters, he found a note from his uncle's butler, requesting his immediate presence, as his master had been seized with paralysis.

Rupert hurried off at once, remained the night with his poor uncle, but he was quite speechless and unconscious, and the physician gave no hope of returning sense, even if he lived. Poor Rupert! with his sorrow for his uncle was mingled the recollection that he could never now absolve him from his promise.

On the day before the dinner party at the Manor House, Mr. Ashleigh came into the drawing-room, where Grace was seated, working by the open window, every now and then putting the work down in her lap, looking out on to the lawn, with that sad, wistful look in her eyes that was always more or

less in them. Mr. Ashleigh had an open letter in his hand.

"My dear Grace, I am so sorry I cannot go to-morrow to the Manor House; you must send a note at once with my excuses."

"Yes, papa; what am I to say?"

"That an important business letter has called me to town, and that I shall not be back until Saturday. Everard can take you, you know."

"Oh, yes! papa, and you go to-day, and will not be back until Saturday?"

A very close observer might have noted the faintest tinge of colour on the girl's pale cheek, and a brighter light in her eyes as she spoke.

"Yes; I go by the half-past four train, and do not return until Saturday. I shall come down with Walter, you know. Send at once, my love," and he left the room.

Grace gathered up her work, and, laying

it aside, wrote the note, and sent it, and also another containing one short line, to the post.

That night the villagers coming home saw the strange lights gleaming in the unused wing of the Priory, and two boys declared they saw a tall figure in black pass the large window that looked into the orchard.

"How provoking! Mr. Ashleigh can't come," said May, as the girls assembled in the dining-room for lunch.

"How do you know?"

"Auntie has just had a note from Grace; he's gone to town on business; and now Auntie has asked the Doctor, and we shall be nine again."

"Well, there's luck in odd numbers," said Gertrude; "we must console ourselves with that idea."

"It's a horrid nuisance; we can't ask any one now, it is too late."

"It is an excellent absence," said Edith;

"I cannot bear that man; we can spare him better than any one."

"There is something about him not altogether pleasant, I admit," said Lilian; "yet he is so very polite and courteous—almost overpoweringly so. Here comes Auntie. Auntie, dear, it seems fated that we are to be only nine to-morrow."

"Yes, love; but it is not a formal party, and, therefore, does not signify so much. We will use the new epergne; and whose turn is it to arrange the flowers?"

"Mine, Auntie," said May, "so depend on their being perfection."

Auntie laughed, and patted the dimpled, laughing face she loved so much.

"You have none of you told me," she said as they took their places at table, "what you think of my young friend, Mr. Prescott?"

"I had seen him before, Auntie," said Lilian.

"So you had, my dear; but, May, what did you think of him?"

"Well, Auntie, I thought he had rather too long a tongue."

"May thinks, perhaps, no one should indulge in an elongation of that unruly member but herself, Auntie," said Gertrude; "I think he was charming."

"He had a very good, merry laugh—what you call 'infectious,'" said Ma'mselle; "it made me laugh all by myself, when it came to me from the garden."

"He is wonderfully merry, certainly," said Lilian; "incurring his Grace's displeasure for his persistent joking."

"I think a 'funny' man is such a bore," said Edith, as she leaned indolently back in her chair, dropping bits of biscuit into Nep's mouth, "I quite agree with the Duke, 'laughing is so tiring, that one only wants to do it so very occasionally.'"

"Edith, you grow lazier and lazier every day," said May.

"Nay, nay," answered Mistress Medlicott, "lazy is too hard a word; Edith is not lazy when there is anything to do, only she objects to exert herself unnecessarily."

"Yes, dear Auntie, you are right; I save myself for an occasion, and then come out strong."

"By-the-bye, Auntie," interrupted May, "have you heard the news, that poor old Poyntz, the schoolmaster, has sent in his resignation to the Vicar, and is going to leave directly?"

"No, I have not heard it; but what connection is there between Poyntz and Edith?" asked Auntie, smiling.

"Nothing, beyond the fact that Edie said the other day, when we passed the school, she should ask him to let her have a Sunday class of boys to teach; I thought that was

wonderful for her; more fatigue than laughing; I can't imagine a more unpleasant way of exerting one's self."

"The labour we delight in physics pain," said Edith. "The amusement I should feel in endeavouring to drive sense into those bucolic heads would prevent any feeling of fatigue."

"You strange child!" said Lilian, "I think you would find that teaching is very fatiguing. I assure you, I am more tired after an hour with my little girls on Sunday, than after a long walk."

"Ah! girls—who would teach girls?"

"Some girls it is a great large pleasure to teach," said Ma'mselle, looking lovingly at her pupils.

"Ah! like me, Ma'mselle dear, you mean, don't you?" said Gertrude.

"I mean all of you; I should, if I could have my way, make you all again leetle things, to commence again to teach you."

"Oh, dear! we can't echo that wish, darling; we would rather now have you to play with us," said May.

"Ah! soon I shall be no use; my last little girl is growing a young lady, knowing as much as I can teach." And tears filled Ma'mselle's eyes, though she strove to hide them with a laugh.

"Ma'mselle, a kind friend is always useful," said Mistress Medlicott; "while I have a home, I trust you will do me the honour to share it; and when I am gone to my last home, I shall leave, as a precious legacy to the care of my dear girls, my valued friend, Mademoiselle Le Clere."

The poor little French woman could only murmur:

"Ah, Madame! vous êtes trop bonne pour moi."

There was a moment's silence; May put her arm round her aunt, and kissed her; and then

Gertrude, suddenly suggesting that Nep was very like Dr. Stillwell in the face, caused a decided change in the conversation; and Lilian, reminding them that the carriage was ordered for some calls at half-past two, they rose from table, and went to get ready for the drive.

Ma'mselle and the two younger girls were to execute some commissions in the village; while Lilian and May were driving with Mistress Medlicott, and were proceeding leisurely along—the heat being too much to permit of much exertion—when they saw approaching them a girl whom they at once recognised as one to whom, some time before, they had given the name of the "Meadow Beauty."

"Why don't we ask the Doctor who she is?" said Gertrude.

"Why, I had forgotten her, it is so long since I have seen her; I believe she is a Dissenter—she never comes to church," said Edith.

"Nonsense, Edith, she does; nearly every Sunday I see her—she sits with Mrs. Broderip, and, I should think, is some relation; you know it was down by her farm in the meadows we met her first."

"So it was, Gerty; well, we will ask the Doctor about her to-morrow."

"Yes, and I shall quarrel with him if he cannot tell me all about her."

"Ah! Gertrude, you are so hard on that poor man," said Ma'mselle; "you boolly him."

"No, no, Ma'mselle," said Gertrude, bursting into a laugh, more loud than was quite correct, but so joyous as to purchase forgiveness; "I don't 'boolly' him; but I am obliged to be rather severe with him, or I should not manage him at all, or get an ounce of news out of him."

"Hush! hush! Gertrude; here comes Mr. Ashleigh—do not make such a noise."

With a courteous, grave, "Good morning," and keeping his hat off till he had passed them, Everard walked on; he was too shy and reserved to stop and speak to them, but he turned and looked after them when he had got some distance away, and said, half-aloud—"that child is like sunshine"—and then he sighed, and wondered if sunshine would ever come into his life; it was all very dark and dreary now—and yet not all, and at the thought a sweet smile brightened all his face: Walter! dear Walter! what would his life be without him? Ah! such a brother was compensation for much sorrow. He thought of him all the way home, and, pushing open the gate, went up the drive, when he heard his name called. It was the woman at the lodge running after him. She whispered some eager communication to him, and ran back; while he, with quicker steps, went on towards the house.

CHAPTER VII.

VERY charming looked the three ladies Murray, as they entered the drawing-room, brilliantly lighted with myriads of wax lights, and scented by the flowers in the conservatory, where Gertrude's doves were cooing, and the fountain was keeping up its pretty accompaniment to them. Better than beautiful were the bright, fresh, fair faces, with the look of high breeding stamped on every feature, and revealing itself also in the graceful bearing and gracious manners, on which point good Mistress Medlicott was most particular; their dresses of white silk, so simply but beautifully made and put on, were varied only by different

flowers ; they always choose their own favourite ones, according to the season, and now the pure, white blossoms of the lily, mingled with the delicate hot-house fern, gleamed in Lilian's sunny hair, and the richest of dark crimson roses in Edith's; while among the nut-brown braids of May's lay nestled a bunch of scarlet geraniums, mixed with some dark, shining leaves. They had left Gertrude busy at a German exercise, having been to the school-room to kiss her before coming down.

"You all look very nice," she had said, with a slight sigh. "How glad I shall be when I've done the high white muslin stage."

"Oh, Gertrude ! I would willingly change places with you," said Lilian.

"May would'nt. Good-bye, Duchess."

May had only shaken her fan at her, and ran down stairs.

They were a very merry party at dinner; for Mr. Prescott was in his brightest spirits, and the efforts of the Duke to keep him in order, added greatly to the fun.

It was an exquisite night, warm and dry; and when they left the drawing-room, the girls all went into the gardens, and Mistress Medlicott ordered the coffee to be carried there to them; so, with rugs spread on the ground, and opera cloaks wrapped round them, they sat in a picturesque group—laughing, singing snatches of songs, making a Babel of sweet sounds. Suddenly Gertrude exclaimed, "What's that?" pointing eagerly to the shrubbery.

"Oh! don't, Gertrude," said May, starting from her seat; "you frighten me."

"Nonsense, May, I can't help it—I see something moving in the shrubbery—black. Look! Look! there it is again."

"Oh! Lady Gertrude, what can it be?"

said Grace, with a white scared face, as she saw, where Gertrude pointed, some object certainly moving amongst the shrubs.

"It's Nep," said Lilian, rising and moving towards the spot.

"Don't—don't go, Lily!" said May, holding her back. "It's much bigger than a dog. Oh! let us scream."

"No—no! silly girls!" said Edith, who had not yet spoken, but had kept her eyes fixed on the spot; "there's nothing to scream at. It is some figure in a cloak—man or woman—who seems hunting for something in the shrubs. I will go and see what it is."

"Yes, we will go together," said Lilian. "Come along, Edie;" and, springing away from May's hold, Lilian took Edith's hands, and they ran across the moonlit lawn—May, who could no longer be restrained, screaming to them to stop. Gertrude had, in the meanwhile, quietly walked into the house to call

one of the men servants to see into the matter; and at May's piercing screams, the gentlemen, who had just entered the drawing-room, came hastily out—the Duke arriving first, and eagerly inquiring "What was the matter?"

"Oh! there is someone, or something, creeping about in that shrubbery," gasped poor May, in her fright seizing the Duke's arm, as she pointed eagerly to the retreating figures of the girls; "and Lily and Edith will go."

"Oh! what fun," said the Duke; "I hope it's a thief. Come, Prescott, old fellow! Here's a chance to distinguish yourself."

"What's the row? A thief! Where? Permit me to make his immediate acquaintance. Which road did he take?"

"Along the shrubbery. You go one way, and I'll go the other."

"Let us go in to Auntie," said May.

"Yes; you had better. Come along, Prescott;" and away went the two young men—May, Grace, and Gertrude, running quickly into the drawing-room to relate the news to Auntie, who was quietly chatting to Dr. Stillwell and Everard. The two gentlemen rose at once to follow the others, but May and Grace implored them not.

"Oh! do not leave us, Doctor, for goodness sake!" said Gertrude. "Imagine if they drive the creature in here."

"I think Lilian and Edith are too bold," said Auntie; "perhaps, Mr. Ashleigh, you will kindly go, and say I request they will come in. One protector is enough for us, I think, Gertrude." She smiled, as Everard went to do her bidding.

"Oh! I don't know; I should not mind fifty," answered Gertrude. "Now, Doctor, sit close to me."

"Are you frightened, Miss Ashleigh?"

said Auntie, looking kindly at the pale, sad-faced girl.

"I was startled at first; but I think it can only be one of the servants—it's too bright a moon for thieves to prowl about."

"Certainly; I do not feel alarmed myself at all. Nep would have given us warning of bad characters lurking about."

"But, Auntie, Nep is in the stable-yard; we could not hear him," said May. "Oh! had we not better shut the windows?"

"Dear no, my Lady!" said the Doctor, who was sitting close to Gertrude, according to her bidding, holding her little hand in his large ones, much as he would have imprisoned a small bird—"this is the last place a thief would enter; but, really, I think it is all a mistake, and that, as Miss Ashleigh says, it is some one who has a perfect right to be there."

In the meanwhile, the Duke and Mr. Prescott had reached the shrubbery; and, running in at different gates to catch the interloper either way, Prescott, running at a desperate pace, suddenly nearly stumbled over a figure standing at the entrance of a summer-house.

"Ah! there you are," he exclaimed, seizing it in a firm grip; "now, who are you? and what do you want?"

"Oh! please sir," said a small voice, "I bean't a doing o' nothing."

"Then, how dare you do it, sir; I'm ashamed of you. Why, sir," he said, dragging the unfortunate boy from the shadow of the trees into the moonlight, "you ought to have been in bed hours ago. Does your maternal parent allow you these moonlight peregrinations?"

"She ain't got none as I knows on, sir; but, please, I was set to watch him, and I

fell asleep, and when I woke he were gone."

"Who's he? and what made you think 'he,' whatever 'he' may be, was in these grounds?"

"'Cause Jack Stiles said as 'ow he seed him, sir, come in this here grounds; and, oh! please, sir, do let me go on a hunting for him—Muster Stillwell will just be angry for me a letting on him go."

"Why didn't you chain him up, you muff?"

"I warn't told to, sir, only to watch him; and I was that tired, I fell asleep. Please let me go, sir; I won't do no mischief."

"No, sir; we will pursue this interesting research together. I will help you to look for 'he'; but, to assist me in my discovery, perhaps you will kindly inform me if 'he' is a bull, a pig, or a dog?"

"Noa, sir," he answered, grinning, "he ain't none o' they—he's no 'arm."

"No' arm! now, what animal is a no 'arm? Never mind, let us pursue this re-search. It is becoming zoologically interesting, sir; and, remember, sir, if a 'no 'arm' does not appear, I shall be compelled to deliver you over to the strong arm of the law;" and so saying, holding the boy still fast, Prescott proceeded down the shrubbery, the boy diving behind every thick shrub, Prescott still following, and never losing hold of him. Once, he exclaimed, "I can see his two tails!" as he dived behind a large tree.

"The interest thickens," exclaimed Prescott, more to himself than the boy; "the thing has two tails! you see we are fast approaching the end of this shrubbery without discovering anything. Hark! voices."

"Prescott! Prescott! where are you?" called the Duke.

"Here—here; I am coming with a captive."

"Oh! my dear fellow," said the Duke, appearing in sight, "why, who have you got here?"

"A captive, I tell you; I found him."

"Never mind him," the Duke interrupted, "I've found the real prowler; and these plucky girls are staying with him while I come for you; but now, perhaps, he'll get troublesome;" and dragging the unlucky boy with them, they ran rapidly on, till they came to a spot where stood an old man, with his grey head all uncovered, in a long dressing gown, the girdle of which, untied, lay on the ground, trailing in streamers behind—the ladies Murray on either side of him; Edith's hand on his shoulder.

Before Prescott could ask a question, or express his surprise, the boy wrenched him-

self from his grasp, and, rushing up to the old man, said:

"Oh! I be glad—come on, old measter, dear—thee'lt have a cold now—and I shall just get a hiding; come along—come."

"Are you in charge of this poor man, boy?" asked the Duke.

"Yes, sir—he'll come along o' me now, won't you, measter, dear?—it's little Bob, you know—come on; you knows Bob?"

"Yes—yes; a good little boy; but you shouldn't run away, you know, from school; nor from your father; your poor old father wants you."

"Take me back to him then, measter, won't you?" said the boy readily; "I'll go back along o' you—come on."

"Yes—yes; are these the angels I'm always seeing; but you can't have my boy—give me back my boy," he said, clasping his

trembling hands together, and looking pleadingly in Edith's face.

"We have not got your boy, Mr. Poyntz," said Edith, calmly and firmly. "Dr. Stillwell is here; and if you will walk towards home with your little scholar, I will send the Doctor to you; now, I am sure you will go at once."

He looked at her searchingly for a moment, and she steadily returned his gaze; and then, taking the little boy's hand, he moved slowly away.

"Let us run back and send the Doctor; he can do anything with him," said Edith, hurriedly; and, running on, they were soon through the shrubbery and on the lawn.

Their story was soon told; and the Doctor lost no time in words, but followed at once the poor old man in whom he had felt so warm an interest; and the girls, sitting down beside Auntie, began to give a

more circumstantial account of their adventure.

"You never saw such pluck, Miss Medlicott, as the ladies showed," said the Duke, "really magnificent; they did not know that they might not be attacked by some furious highwayman with a revolver."

"Nothing was ever seen like it, but my seizing the dastardly marauder in the shrubbery," said Prescott, "and, unhappily, no one saw that but myself. It was fine—it was worthy of—let's see, who's the party that displayed such heroic courage at—"

"Oh! shut up, Syd," said the Duke; "I want to tell Mistress Medlicott about the ladies. They were considerably in advance of me, you know, and, to my astonishment, I saw them approach the figure, and address it. I called loudly that the person, whoever it might be, should know help was at hand,

and ran as swiftly as I could. When I got near, I found it was an unhappy being, evidently not in possession of his senses, to whom Lady Edith was talking without the slightest fear; and they both consented to stay with him whilst I went for Prescott—actually, it was magnificent."

"I don't see there was anything to be afraid of in poor old Poyntz," said May.

"But, you see," said the Duke, turning to her with his bright smile, "they did not know it was old Poyntz, and, in point of fact, it was not him; it was only what was left of him; and he really presented the strangest appearance in a long brown dressing gown, with a girdle streaming behind him—oh! it's a shame to laugh; but, upon my honour, it was a most strange, extraordinary sight."

"A no 'arm, with two tails," said Prescott, with the utmost gravity.

"A what!" said the Duke, going off into a fit of laughter.

"The person on whom I so bravely seized, with that heroism which apppears to be utterly unappreciated, informed me that he was searching for 'he;' and, on my inquiring what he was—pig, dog, or bull—he said he was 'no 'arm,' and presently, with a wild cry, he rushed into a bush, exclaiming, 'I see his two tails.' Talk of courage—think of me pursuing such a monster!"

"Well, except that, I am sorry to hear of poor old Poyntz's condition," said Auntie. "I think the adventure has been more amusing than dangerous; and a lesson to our timid ones not to give way too soon to alarms. Where is the frightened bird?" she asked, looking round to where May had been seated.

"She is gone into the conservatory,

Auntie," said Gertrude; "shall I fetch her?"

"Yes; I think we must have some music."

"Oh! please," said the Duke, "music here is entrancing."

"You are very good, your Grace, to say so, I am sure," said Auntie, bowing and smiling. "We must ask, in return, for a song from you."

"Oh! with pleasure. I'll sing as long as you like."

"Now, Duke, gently," said Prescott. "You know you can't fulfil that promise, because it would result in your passing the rest of your life singing."

For all return to his compliment, the Duke threw a little pellet of paper at him, which he had been amusing himself with rolling up while he talked.

"Some one will have to be sent in search

of Lady Gertrude, now," said Everard to Lilian; "she seems to fail in inducing Lady May's return."

"Yes; I can't think what they are doing. I had better play first; you can all talk, you know," she said, smiling.

"You do not insist that we shall, I hope."

"No; but people seem to like to do so."

"Not real music lovers. I shall go and sit in the corner, and, with shut eyes, hear every note you play, and set thoughts to the melody."

"It is pleasant to play to such listeners; I must do my best," she answered.

He opened the piano for her, and went away, as he said, to sit alone, where no one could speak to him, and thoroughly enjoy the exquisite melody which she played.

During its performance, Gertrude came back into the room; and, going up to Mistress Medlicott, said in a low whisper:

"Something has put May out; she says she feels faint."

"Dear—dear! she has frightened herself so; shall I go to her?"

"No, no, Auntie, she's—" and Gertrude crossed two of her long white fingers, and looked mischievously in her aunt's face; "I promised to get Edith to sing first, and then she will come back; but she will not sing herself, she says."

Edith sang twice, by the Duke's urgent request, before May returned. At the end of the last verse, she came and sat on a low seat, close to the conservatory doors; and when the song was finished, and he had warmly expressed his thanks, the Duke came across to her, and said: "Now, Lady May, for my treat—the 'Parlate d'Amor.'"

"I cannot sing to-night," she answered, haughtily; "my *cowardice* has shaken my voice."

"I am so sorry; but I do not wonder at it. I am sure it was enough to frighten anyone to see someone prowling about in one's grounds—such an extraordinary figure, too. I assure you I was frightened to death. I think your sisters were miracles."

"So you said before. I think their bravery less remarkable than my cowardice. Had I ventured to go in search, I should have seen at once, as they did, it was the poor schoolmaster, and there was no cause for fear—but please drop the subject; there has been more than enough said about it."

"Yes; we will bury old Poyntz out of sight. I will go and sing for you, shall I? I have a new song you have not heard, so deliciously sentimental—that goose Prescott always says it compels him to drop a silent tear. It is called, 'Love me, or I die.'"

He sang his song, and they begged for

another; and then the Ashleighs' carriage came, and a message from Dr. Stillwell that he was going to stay all night with Poyntz; and so the evening broke up; but the Duke loitered about, turning over the music, talking gaily of every imaginable subject, Prescott having twice to remind him that the trap was waiting, and that Firefly objected to that proceeding; but he went at last, and May, who seemed quite to have recovered her usual manner, put carefully in water on her dressing-table a Cape jasmine, that had decorated his Grace's coat all the evening.

CHAPTER VIII.

PRESCOTT had quite as much to do as he knew how with his horse for the first few miles; for Firefly had objected, as her master expected she would, to be kept waiting, and revenged herself on him by nearly pulling his arms out of joint. Therefore, they could not hold much conversation for the first mile or so; but puffed away at their cigars in silence.

The Duke spoke first: "Melancholy party that."

"Who?—where?"

"I mean Miss Ashleigh; she's a sort of death's head on a mop-stick—such a contrast to those bright, beautiful girls."

"Now, don't go hurting my feelings, or I

shall be obliged to revenge myself by depositing you in a ditch. I think there is something inexpressibly touching about that young lady. Melancholy has marked her for her own; and I'm thinking seriously of disputing the point with melancholy. Really, now, I think we should be a sweet contrast—she 'pensiero,' and me 'allegretto.'"

"Well, I hear she'll have no end of money; so I advise you to go in and win."

"The brother is of the muff species, is he not?"

"No—indeed! a very clever, intelligent fellow; quiet and sad. That appears to run in the family; but he talks well, and with a vein of quiet humour, which is very pleasant. And what a sweet voice it is! I thought he ought to sing; but he says he does not—but when he speaks, it is like music. There has been a great deal written about sweet voices—but I think they are very rare."

"I did not hear Ashleigh speak."

"My dear fellow, I don't suppose you ever hear anyone but yourself; but now, come, give me your opinion of the ladies Murray. You are no bad judge of character; let us hear your verdict."

"Well, to commence with—the eldest, of course, gentle and pliable to a fault, with more sentiment than sense—more heart than head—a party to exclaim: 'I know not; I ask not if guilt's in that heart; I but know that I love thee, whatever thou art.'"

"Well, go on," said the Duke, laughing; "Lady May?"

"Sincere, determined, irascible, passionate in love and hate—with so powerful a wish to please, that it affects all her actions."

"Humph! You think that, do you? Well —Lady Edith?"

"Indifferent to praise or blame—heroic—calm—steadfast in friendship—constant in

love ; but loving few ; and, being a lady, I will use the word persistent, rather than a harsher term."

"You odd being !—now, Gertrude ?"

"Oh ! she's only a chick—not quite out of the shell."

"No—no ! no shirking ; let's have it !"

"Well, then, she's worth the whole boiling," he said, giving Firefly a touch, which sent them, with one bound, through the lodge gates into the drive.

"Well, I'm sure, Prescott ! you don't mean you're touched !" exclaimed the Duke.

"My dear fellow, have I not already disclosed my intention of disputing the possession of Miss Ashleigh with the foul fiend melancholy ?"

"Pooh !—pooh !—not in your line, my boy ! but here we are ; and, I think we may congratulate ourselves, safe and sound, Fire-

fly's temper being none of the best to-night."

"Have you been frightened?"

"Yes, awfully," said the Duke laughing.

"Take care of her, William," said Prescott, as he tossed the reins to the groom; "she's fretted, and pulled the whole way. She's in a frightful lather. Everyone's in bed, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," said the old butler, who always sat up for his young master; "will you take anything, sir?"

"Yes; a bed-candle for me. Will you do anything in the soda-and-brandy or claret way, Duke?"

"Oh! nothing, thank you."

"Good-night; sweet dreams attend thy sleeping."

"Thanks—ditto;" and so they separated.

When Grace and Everard arrived at home, the door was answered by Dolly, who, putting

up a warning finger, motioned them into the dining-room.

"He's come home—about an hour ago."

"Oh! Dolly, what shall we do?" said Grace, clasping her hands together—her white face whiter than ever.

"Now, don't go worreting yourself—I've settled it all. I got him to bed; and all the servants are frightened to death. They won't go near that side of the house, the noises have been awful—and the blue lights—and I told them how I'd seen the lady in the black cloak walk through the door at the end of the gallery, so they've all hustled off to bed, and only Canham and I are up. I have had a day with them," she said, with a little low laugh. "But now, dearie, you get away quick, and nobody will meddle with you. I'll call you in the morning in good time, dear. Whatever should we have done

if that old fellow hadn't murdered the other, and given this house such a bad name? Here's your candle, Mr. Everard. Have you had a pleasant evening?"

"Yes—very. What induced my father to come home, Dolly? Did he say?"

"No; he was so sweet, bless you! butter would not melt in his mouth. He said, 'I suppose you did'nt expect me so soon, Dolly; the young people are not yet home, of course.' He does them things on purpose, you know, to catch us out. He's so suspicious—he thinks we're always taking him in as he takes in others."

Everard sighed; and, with a kindly good night to Dolly, he went upstairs, followed by Grace. On the landing he turned and kissed her, and then said, in a low voice:

"One more for *her*." I will see her somehow in the morning. Of course, she will not go before dusk to-morrow?"

"No; unless she thinks the early dawn safer."

"Well, then, I shall not see her again. Can I come now?" he added.

"Better not, I think, dear. She gets so excited, she will not sleep."

"It is too vexatious his coming home; he must suspect."

"Oh! do not say so; or I shall wish more than ever I was dead, Everard, with this one brief gleam of happiness denied me."

"Well, love, we will not anticipate evil; only, be very careful."

"Wish me good night, dear."

"Good night, poor little white face. We are heavily weighted, little darling; but it is not more than we *can* bear—that we are sure, or it would not be sent."

She made no answer; her heart was full, and brimmed over at her weary eyes.

"God bless you, both!" he said, and he

went into his room and she into hers. Shortly after, a figure, in white from head to foot, glided with silent foot-fall through the moonlit gallery, along the hall, and, entering noiselessly the uninhabited wing, sped swiftly up the old oak staircase, and opened gently a door, which gave admission to a large room, in which stood a bedstead of carved oak, with hangings of tapestry—faded and moth-eaten—panelled oak walls, and oaken furniture, with a large casement window, through which the moonlight streamed (for the heavy tapestry curtains had not been drawn across it), with its soft radiant light putting to shame the small night-lamp, which burnt on a little table near the bed. On the dressing-table stood a vase of beautiful fresh-gathered flowers, and a pair of modern candlesticks, with wax candles in them, some velvet slippers, and a blue cashmere dressing-gown on a chair—

giving alone the evidence of some fresh arrival in the dreary, ghostly room, and somewhat brightening its appearance. The white figure, throwing the covering from its head, closed and locked the door, and going softly to the bed, surveyed with a look of intense love and interest its sleeping occupant. The holiness which this intense love gave to the white face and her white garments might have induced an observer to think some pure denizen of another world was watching the slumberer. It was a woman—'beautiful exceedingly'; but with an expression which made her yet more like the "Lady of the Lea," for it spoke of a haughtiness which nothing could subdue—a determination which nothing could surmount.

Presently the sleeper stirred, and threw one fair, white arm over her head; and then, opening her large, dark eyes, she sprung up

and exclaimed, with a thrill of joy in her voice :

"My darling! my Gracie! I am so glad."

"Hush! sweet mother; do not rouse yourself. I am coming to lie down beside you until four o'clock. Dolly will come then; and oh! my precious!" she continued, taking the beautiful head, and folding it to her bosom as a mother would cherish a child, "you must go then, or at dusk to-morrow — for he has come back."

A look of dread and horror crossed the mother's face, and she said :

"Oh! my Gracie, at dawn—at dawn ; I would not risk the horrors of a whole day.'

"Well, then, be still ; here—darling Everard sends you this ;" and, pressing a long kiss on her lips, she knelt down beside her, as she fell back on her pillow, and mur-

mured lovingly, "let me stay so, and rub your dear hands till you sleep, and then I will lie down."

A smile of ineffable love and tenderness parted the mother's lips, and she answered:

"It is too sweet to deny you, my own child;" and so they rested till the day dawned.

The light sleep into which Grace had fallen was readily disturbed by a gentle tap at the door, which she opened, and admitted Dolly.

"Now, my dear, we've no time to lose; is she awake?"

"No—ah! yes, she is. Mother, sweet, you must go," said Grace; and the tears, as she spoke, filled her eyes, and trembled in her voice.

"Let her take her coffee before she rises, Miss Grace."

"No—no; nothing, Dolly; it is so light, it must be late; let me go quickly."

"You're quite safe, ma'am, I assure you; no one will stir yet; and you draw the hood of your cloak well over your head, and go out at the door in this wing, and there's not a soul belonging to the village that will not fly at the sight of you, if there be any about."

"I shall hope to see you, my child, next week; your aunt Clarinda is going to ask him to let you stay a day or two with her."

"Oh, mother dear! but he will not let me come?"

"Yes—yes; I think she can manage it. Walter has told her what to say. How well my boy looks, Gracie; and dear Everard—better than usual, I think. Walter has been three times to see me. Everard will bring you to me, love, and I shall see him then; tell him this, with my dear love. Be brave, my child. We shall meet again soon; and

some day, my little white dove, we shall be together, never to part."

"Oh, mother! for that day, God only knows how I long."

"Ah! Miss Grace—Miss Grace—I shall have to carry you away in a moment," said Dolly, who had been helping her mistress' hurried toilet; "that kind of talk is not allowed."

"Poor child! it is little wonder, Dolly; now for my cloak, quick!"

"Yes, here it is; I'm coming with you, you know. I'll see her safe to the inn, miss," she said to Grace; "now please run back to your room; I've locked the door —here's the keys."

"Dolly," said Grace, after her long, clinging embrace of her mother, with the tears streaming down her face, "have you ever thought what to say, if you are caught out at this unusual hour?"

"Oh! bless you! no, my dear; I never trouble my head about what I'm going to say, till I've got to say it. I shall just put my dear mistress into the inn, and be back in no time; my bedroom door's locked, and I'm fast asleep, you know—come along!"

Silently and swiftly the two went down the old staircase, and out at the door of the unused wing of the house, across the orchard and out into the high road; then Mrs. Ashleigh took off the cloak in which she had been enveloped from head to foot; Dolly folded it into a small leathern bag, and they proceeded on their way. Arrived at the Station Inn, Mrs. Ashleigh asked for a private sitting-room until the first morning train; and after receiving her mistress' promise that she would have a proper breakfast before she went, Dolly went home again as fast as she could, meeting no one by the way, but some farm men going to work, who

only said, "Out early, miss;" to which she answered, laughing:

"Yes, I like to get my walks over before it's too hot;" and letting herself in by the same door, she gained her own room without interruption.

CHAPTER IX.

The young ladies had anxiously awaited the arrival of Dr. Stillwell to inquire all the particulars of poor old Poyntz, and Gertrude assailed him with more questions than he could answer; but Lilian, coming to his aid, said:

"Tell us all about it, Doctor, in your own way."

And so he said that he had had no trouble in getting the poor old man home—he was always tractable with him; and that he had soon fallen into a deep sleep, from which he awoke refreshed and quite sensible. He said he had had uneasy dreams; that he had dreamed he walked a long way to see a son

who had been dead a long, long while ; and that he had better give up the place of schoolmaster—it was too much for him. The Rector, he said, had been to see him, and had arranged to let him go at once, as he seemed so set on it. He had chosen to betake himself to a little village in the Surrey Highlands, where, he said, he had friends ; " and I," continued the Doctor, " am going to ask Miss Medlicott's leave to take him—he is quite unfit to travel alone. Do you think you can spare me, Lady Gertrude ? "

" Oh, yes ! Doctor ; and I think a change will do you good ; a week or two in that beautiful air will be charming for you."

" For shame, Gertrude," said Lilian, and yet she could not help smiling ; " the Doctor does not want to be away so long ; you have done hardly any work all the summer."

" Doctor, hear her ! " exclaimed Gertrude, " have I not written one of the most elegant

essays, of this or any other time, on the advantages of steam? have I not written an account of the Stuarts, which would shame Macaulay? put twelve stanzas of Childe Harold into elegant prose? and, oh! in short, done, in this brief summer, more work than Lilian ever dreamed of doing."

"Lady Gertrude has one useful quality, Lady Lilian," said the Doctor; "she works very fast when she *does* work; and, by the aid of a wonderful memory, she manages to make a good show, without a very large amount of exertion."

"Now you've spoilt it all," said Gertrude, "and I shall be as stupid as an owl this morning—I know I shall."

"Well, let us try," said the Doctor, kindly, as Lilian left the room, and the tutor and his pupil alone.

"No, I'm not nearly ready yet; I want to

know when old Poyntz is going ? and who is coming in his stead ? "

" He is going to-morrow; but who is coming in his stead, I cannot tell you. Come, my dear young lady, it is so late. Did you master the sum I left you yesterday ? "

" No—of course I did not; I told you it was simply impossible; I tried dreadfully hard, and then I took to the arts, and made this pretty little sketch for you ; " and she handed him the paper on which her sum was, with a certainly very clever sketch of Nep and the kitten—the kitten raising one paw, and resenting, in cat-like fashion, the intrusion of Nep's tail in her face.

"Dear—dear ! " said the Doctor, trying to suppress his laughter ; " this is sad waste of time, you know ; really, this sum could have been done by a child of ten."

" Oh, Doctor ! then I suppose we arrive at fifteen at a foggy state of intellect ; for, I

assure you, the more I tried the more dense I became; and if you only knew *how* I hate those men with their buckets of water, and their ridiculous determination to empty a pond in twelve hours. Why must one do sums? I see no earthly reason why we should."

"My dear lady, all knowledge has its use; the mind unfed would starve, as the body would, and——"

"Do you think poor old Poyntz will die, Doctor? I think it would serve him right, for frightening us so; did you punish the small boy for letting him go?"

"No—no; now look, will you? you must first get the number of gallons the buckets contain, and then——"

"Oh, yes; but do let's rub this sum out, and have another—I am so tired of it. I feel inclined to kick the bucket," she said, slyly glancing up in the Doctor's face.

"Oh, my lady!—my lady!" said the Doctor, gravely shaking his head; but Gertrude sprung from her seat, and, kneeling down beside him, took from his hands the pencil he was going to use, and said:

"Now, you nice, dear, kind, *good* Doctor, a little conversation will really do me so much more good than horrid sums. We will talk in Johnsonian language. Really, I will be most careful how I round my sentences. Now, listen—My dear Dr. Stillwell, if I do not trespass too much on your valuable time, I would venture to ask for a little information on a subject which has excited a warm interest in the minds of my sisters, and my own—no, no, that's bad; in my sisters' minds, and my own—that is better. I am referring to a young person who resides in a farm in the meadows kept by one Broderip. Who is the beautiful and interesting maiden?"

"My dear Lady Gertrude——"

"Yes, go on; that will do for a beginning; who is she?"

"I cannot really permit this."

"Oh! that won't do at all. No; now really do tell me who that girl is, and I will be as good as sugar."

"I really only know that her name is Kathleen O'Brian, and that she is grandchild to the old people. There! now go to work."

"Oh, dear! is that all you can tell me?"

"Every word, indeed; now, if you really do not feel inclined for figures today, get 'Macaulay," and we will read a little."

With a mock face of despair, Gertrude rose and took the book from the shelf, and with many annotations and remarks, not to be found in the printed edition, she read several pages of the history; and then, declaring it

made her chest ache, and she had heaps of work to do for Ma'mselle, she persuaded the Doctor to release her.

After luncheon, the girls had arranged to take a long walk to a wood, to seek for a Green Man orchis, which they had been told grew there in abundance, and had just ordered the trowel and basket to be got ready for their expedition, when the loud barking of Nep and ringing of the door-bell proclaimed a visitor.

"Oh! who can that be? what a bore," said Edith.

"It need not stop you, my dears," said Mistress Medlicott. "I can go to them."

"The Duke of Claverton," answered the servant.

"The Duke! dear me! His grace is following an old fashion in calling so soon after the party," said Mistress Medlicott. "He is anxious to know if you have sustained any

ill effects from your fright, May;" but May was gone.

"Come, girls, and just speak to him, and then you can go," said Auntie.

He came forward to meet them as they entered, in his bright, eager way; and, when he heard they were starting on an expedition, he begged to be allowed to join it; there was nothing he liked so much in the world as a wild flower hunt. Might he order his man to take the horses round to the stables? for, of course, they were going to walk—it was not at all too hot, with such a lovely breeze.

And so they set out—all the young, merry party—with good Ma'mselle to take charge of them; and, arrived in the cool, deep shelter of the wood, they voted that rest was most desirable before any search was made for the orchis; and, finding a pleasant spot, where some felled trees lay—the faithful ivy

clinging still about them—they seated themselves there, Gertrude making a pillow of Nep, who had followed them, and who very contentedly submitted to make himself thus useful to his mistress.

Through the trees came aslant the long lines of the summer sun, and the birds sang and chirped and flitted from bough to bough, and a bee, heavily laden with the spoil from the sweet blossoms he had rifled, buzzed past them; and the noise of children in the meadows at play, the tinkle of a sheep-bell, and the rumble of a waggon in the distance, winding slowly along the high road, were the sort of dreamy sounds that alone gave evidence aught lived on earth but themselves.

Somewhat tired with their walk, and impressed by the exquisite repose, their merry tongues were silent awhile; and then, Gertrude, growing tired first of quiet and

silence, jumped up to go on their search, followed readily by Lilian, Edith, and Ma'mselle—more leisurely by May and the Duke. The brambles kept catching May's dress, and the lace on her hat, so that their progress was so slow that the others were out of sight, and only Gertrude's ringing laughter could be occasionally heard. They had suddenly become very silent; beyond May's "thank you" for the trouble his Grace took to disentangle her dress and lace, nothing had been said by either of them. May could not imagine why the Duke was so silent, and wished he would say sometning—anything—it was so awkward; and yet she could not speak herself; every subject she endeavoured to begin died on her lips. At length, with a great effort, she said:

"I don't see the orchis, do you?"

"The orchis? no; certainly not in the

least. Let us go this way," he said, suddenly turning in the opposite direction to which the others had gone. "I think we shall be sure to find it, and how charming it will be if we get it before the others. What is it like?" he continued, peeping amongst the brushwood and plume-like ferns on either side the narrow pathway—so narrow that they could no longer walk side by side. May murmured some reply, and he sprang on in advance some paces; then, turning back, he said:

"Do you mind scrambling a little—just on here; I see such a lovely spot?"

No; she did not mind.

"Let me take your hand, and help you."

Very simple words—why did they make May tremble, and feel as though she had no breath left? Silence again, and more entanglements of lace and dress, and they are standing in a space where fir trees have made

a thick shelter from the sun, and a carpet with the scented branches and cones which have fallen. They hear no sound now, "save the carol of the song-birds in the trees." And again they both are silent. Oh! what would May give to be able to speak? but she feels tongue-tied. Yet she is the first to make an effort to break the oppressive silence. He stands turning over the dry leaves with his riding-whip.

"Won't they wonder where we are? I think we had better find them," she says.

"One moment; it—it is so lovely here, and you are tired; sit down."

"Oh, no! we must go," she said, and moved a step or two on; but he caught her hand, and she heard a voice as if in a dream murmur softly: "If I dared hope that words of mine could make you wish to stay, May; it is so hard to speak much when one feels much — May! — May!" Nearer — nearer

came the sound; the hand was prisoned in both of his now; and, as again the low voice repeated with sweet monotony the name which was music to him who spoke it, and to her who heard it uttered with such tenderness, the crackling of branches startled them; and, springing through the bushes, with her beautiful hair hanging loose about her face, and her hat in her hand, Gertrude stood before them.

"Oh!—I beg—I mean, here you are," she said, blushing and laughing. "I sprang in here to hide from the others; don't tell you saw me; they're close behind;" and she flew away and disappeared as quickly as she came.

The hand, which had been dropped, was seized again, and, in an eager whisper, he said: "You know what I mean; say, 'Yes, Philip'—do."

"Yes, Philip!" Only the lips moved;

but he was watching the blushing face as though his life hung on the answer, and he read the words upon her lips. He was busy hunting amongst the dead leaves, and she had rushed away into another part, when the rest of the party appeared.

In "Auntie's" room, sits "Auntie" herself—her hands on May's head, who is kneeling before her. The happy tale has been told.

"I am very pleased, my child; had I chosen for you myself, I could not have been better pleased. He is a true gentleman—upright, single-hearted, affectionate, and with a merry, happy temperament, which would make any home bright—even a less costly one than he will take my bird to. We shall all miss you, dearie; but we shall look at it in the best light, and remember it is only having another home, in which we shall all be always welcome, shall we not?"

"Oh, Auntie—mother! can you doubt it?" answered May, flinging her arms round Mistress Medlicott's neck, and kissing her passionately; "but I'm half-frightened now, and almost wish I had said, 'No.' He will never love me and bear me, with all my petulance, as you have all done, will he, Auntie?"

"My child! what has made us bear with you?—Because we loved you, and you loved us. There is no being so perfect but some little faults can be found by those they live with—no home so bright but has its shadows; but love can teach forbearance with the faults, and make the shadows only cause the brightness to be more radiant."

"I feel to want so much love, Auntie—and to deserve so little. And he is so good—so sweet-tempered—oh! too good for me, altogether."

"Never mind, if he does not think so,"

said Auntie smiling, and patting the girl's burning cheek; "there is no sign of future happiness greater than that each should deem the other 'too good' during this first fever. When the delirium is past, you will shake down into rational beings, seeing and knowing each other—as you really are—full of human faults and weaknesses; but, feeling that the faults, even, are better than other peoples' virtues, and that those imperfections which strangers may condemn will be sweet to you, because they mark the identity, as it were, of the being that is dearer and better to you than any on earth—that is true love, as I see it, my May; and God grant you may feel and possess it, henceforth and for ever—I say 'for ever,'" she said, with more solemnity, "because such love lives beyond the grave. Now, I will go down to him; and shall I warn him what a troublesome task he has undertaken—what a

naughty, wilful, petulant, little wife he will have ?"

"He won't believe you," May answered, laughing, with the tears in her eyes.

" I fear not ; I should only be wasting time and breath."

In the library he stood, awaiting the verdict. He sprang forward when the door opened to admit the gentle little lady. She held out her hand to him, with a smile that spoke more than words, and, bending down, he kissed it, and said : " Dear *Auntie* now —is it ?"

" Yes, indeed ; and I am quite satisfied with my new nephew."

" I hope I have not been too hasty ; but since I first saw Lady May," he said, leading Mistress Medlicott to a chair, " I have felt she must be my wife ; and I made up my mind on this visit to Oakdean to see if I had any chance. Straws that only a lover

would snatch at made me believe I was not indifferent, and to-day I determined to decide my fate. Oh! dear Mistress Medlicott, I'm awfully happy—upon my word."

"Long may you remain so; and I think you have an excellent prospect. When do you leave Oakdean?"

"On Monday; but as there is no reason for delay, I may come soon and claim my wife, may I not?"

"Well, I don't know; I think there's much sense in the saying that it is well to see your betrothed in all the seasons," answered the old lady, smiling; "May is very young; I think this time twelvemonth."

"Oh, Mistress Medlicott! a twelvemonth —an eternity!"

"There is no going by love's chronology; 'hours are moments—moments hours,' as best suits the tyrant," she answered; "but let us, at any rate, *say* so; and we will see,

as time goes on, whether it will be better to shorten the probation."

"Oh, dear!—well, I must content myself, I suppose; but, never mind—it must be a very bright time; and I may come and see her very often, may I not?" he said, drawing his chair close to Mistress Medlicott. "I may come to-morrow to dinner; and you will bring her to town in the season, and I can go to balls with her, and dance with her—my own little angel!—and enjoy all the agony of the men, who will be ready to kill me. I shall expect pistols and daggers at every street corner. Oh, yes! it will be delightful;" and he tossed back the long hair from his radiant face, and jumped out of his chair, walking about the room, rubbing his hands; and then, coming back to his seat, he said: "I may see her again before I go?—which, I suppose, I must—now, those absurd people at Oakdean will want their dinner."

"Yes! I doubt if your happiness will have taken away their appetite," said Mistress Medlicott, laughing. "I will send the little maiden to bid you good-bye; and to-morrow we shall hope to see you when we're absurd enough to dine."

He laughed himself as he opened the door for her, and said: "Tell her to make haste."

She was not long before she came; and, when the lingering adieu was over, she went back to her sisters with the look of a strange happiness in her face, and a half-fearful sense of a strange joy in her heart. She wore on her finger a ring, formed of one large turquoise, which had just changed owners.

"But it is only till he gets another," she explained to Gertrude, whose quick eye had caught the new ring at once; and whose delight, at this event in the family, was uncontrollable.

"Oh! May, dear, do tell us what he said; how I *should* like to know."

"Gertrude! do not be so silly, dear," rebuked Lilian.

"Yes—just as if May would," said Edith; "but if she were to ask me such a question, I would tell her something."

"Perhaps I never shall ask you, Edith, dear; you may never know what is said under such circumstances."

"Don't be pert, Miss," said Edith; "but, now, do tell us one thing, May—is it settled when it's to be?"

"Oh! no, Edith—of course not; we have not realised our engagement yet, at least I have not; I feel in a dream; I wish it was bed-time, instead of dinner-time; I am sure I cannot eat any."

"Pretty Duchess!" said Gertrude, kissing her; "I don't wonder; I am sure I should not be able to eat under the circumstances.

Oh, dear! it is delightful; I *must* dance;" and seizing Edith round the waist, she performed a wild galop round the room, unheeding the remonstrance of her sisters.

Of course, little else could be thought of or talked of that night; and May was glad to make a short evening of it, and get away to the sanctuary of her room, and live over again the happy moments beneath the fir trees.

CHAPTER X.

"HAVE you any objection to my going to the station, papa, to meet Walter, this evening?" asked Grace at breakfast time.

"None in the least, my love—of course not. When is Rupert Carrington coming down again?"

"I don't know, papa; he said soon."

"Well, next time he comes, do be a little more cordial to him; you know my poor little girl must not be left in maiden solitude with only her poor old father, and Rupert would make a capital husband. You see, my dear, life is uncertain; we must all of us live in expectation of our great change; and when, in the common course of events, I am taken from you, you will have but a

small income ; Everard is my heir, and then there's Walter ; so, my child, it is well to look out to establish yourself."

"Dear papa, please don't talk like that ; I shall never marry."

"Ha ! ha ! we shall see ; but any way oblige me by a brighter and more courteous manner when next our friend comes."

Grace made no answer ; argument, she knew too well, was fruitless ; and the newspaper arriving at the moment, put a stop to further conversation.

Walter had much to tell her, on their short walk from the station, of his visit to his mother, and the arrangements he had made with his aunt to invite Grace.

"You know, I believe, she is the one person in the world my father fears, Grace ; she is acquainted with his early history ; and I often doubt the means by which his large wealth was accumulated. Aunt Cla-

rinda has evidently some strong hold on him; and I have frequently heard her reproach poor mother, and say: 'You know, Eleanor, how I warned you of him; you have no one but yourself to thank.'"

"Poor mother! fancy his coming back when I had got her in the house."

"Yes; sometimes I think he suspects."

"That is what Everard says—what should we do if he found us out?"

"Well, we should have to invent some plan—for see her we will!"

They had reached the Priory, and were walking up the lawn, as Walter said this; they had heard no footsteps, yet their father's voice behind them, said:

"Ah, Walter! got back—what is the exciting subject of conversation?"

"Oh! nothing particular. Have you heard about your friend, Major Carrington, sir? he is dangerously ill!"

"No! is he really; poor old man. Alas! we must all have our turn. Hark! there is the dressing gong—go in, I am only going to speak to Wallcott;" and he moved off in the opposite direction. Grace turned a hopeless look to her brother:

"Walter! he heard?"

"I fear he did, Grace; but do not worry yourself, I will think of some other way, and you can manage it when you go to town—if he will let you," he thought, as he went up to his own room; "but I'm much mistaken if a storm is not brewing."

Sunday passed without any marked event; the usual routine of church going, and a stroll in the grounds, and dinner, and music, during which Mr. Ashleigh, to the young people's joy, went to his room, to write letters, he said; and then Grace and her brothers drew their chairs together for a long chat.

It had been very close and oppressive all day; and now over the moon came rolling heavy lurid clouds, and low down in the horizon flashed every now and then a gleam of light—the reflection of the storm far off, but which was evidently travelling up. Grace was so alarmed at the storms, that her brothers always sat up with her until they ceased; and Walter, noticing the threatening state of the weather, had proposed that they should take the opportunity of discussing what was best to be done in case their mother's visit had been discovered. While they talked, the night grew darker; and the low muttering of the thunder made poor Grace tremble, and draw nearer to Walter.

"Shut up the windows, Walter," she said.

"Shall we?—but that old man delights in watching the storm," he answered.

"Oh, never mind! If Gracie prefers to

shut it out, do so by all means; but it *is* so grand, dear."

"So awful, Everard."

"That was a good one," said Walter, as he closed the last shutter, and one vivid flash lighted up the sky.

"Superb," said Everard; "a thunder-storm to me is like a grand fugue played on a military band. Hark! there go the drums. Glorious!" he said, as the thunder rolled round the house.

"Oh! Everard, to look at you almost makes me cease to be afraid," said Grace, looking up in his face.

"I wish you could quite, little sister; for it is very miserable to be frightened, I should think."

"Very; and I am afraid of so many things —you of nothing. Come back, Walter, and sit away from the window, and the steel fire-place —the middle of the room is the safest place."

"My dear Grace," said Walter, laughing, "do not be such a little goose. We are as safe in ene place as another. Every bullet bullet has its billet,' and will find us out, hide where we will. Let us go on talking, and forget the storm."

But it was easier said then done; for, though the sight of the lightning was shut out, still the heavy peals of thunder, and plashing of the rain, spoke of the fury with which it raged, and Grace could not keep her thoughts from it.

Presently the drawing-room door opened a little way, and Dolly looked in.

"May I come in?"

"Oh, yes! Dolly; we shall be glad of your company," said Walter. "Come and tell us a story; Missie is most awfully alarmed."

"I'm come to tell you something rather strange. I've frightened others till the tables

are turned," she said, coming in and closing the door behind her; "there *is* someone in the old wing—at least, something—and a light in the room."

"Nonsense, Dolly; my father—prowling about."

"Your father never goes there, Mr. Walter; and, more than that, I have the keys. You know he gave them to me when we first came, and said, 'Keep these rooms locked, Dolly; I can have the keys when I want them, but I would rather no one else had. The foolish people have an idle tale of ghosts about that wing; and so, keep it locked up'—and you know I have diligently," she said with a merry twinkle in her eye.

"But, Dolly dear," said Grace, "are you not joking? You do not mean you yourself have seen lights in the rooms."

"I have, really. Two of the girls came in just before the storm began; and, looking as

white as sheets, begged me to come in the orchard and see the lights. When I got there I fancied I did see a glimmer, but too faint to be quite sure about; but when Patty and Maggie went up to their rooms afterwards, both together (for they were afraid to go alone), they shrieked like wild cats, and flew down again, for they declared they had seen a figure in a cloak go through the door. Of course, it was my game to keep up the terror; but I thought I'd better see about it myself—so I took the keys and went off, quietly telling them I should come and ask Mr. Everard about it. I put the key in the door—I own I did not feel right down comfortable—and there, sure enough, was a figure in the corner holding a lantern or something—I can't say what—for I pretty soon slammed the door and locked it, so whoever it is must get out as he came in, whichever way that was."

"It must be my father, Dolly," said Walter; "he suspects us, I am sure."

"But, my dear, I went to his room only a minute or two before. It was locked; and he said he'd ring when he wanted anything; besides, here are the keys," she said, holding up two large keys on a ring.

"That is odd," said Everard; "let us go and see into it, Walter. Dolly, you stay with Miss Grace;" for, as another peal of thunder shook the house, Grace, with a cry, seized Walter's arm.

"Oh, yes! I'll stay with Missie; but, suppose it is his lordship, and he sees you spying after him, and going into the wing which he strictly forbid me to open, there'll be a nice kettle of hot water for all of us."

"And suppose it is not him, and some evil-disposed person preying on our fears," said Grace. "You may both be murdered; oh! don't go."

"Any evil-disposed person will be more frightened at us than we of them, dear," said Everard. "Rest here with Dolly, while we go and lay this ghost." They opened the door with this intention, and encountered outside the butler and two or three maids.

"Oh! please, sir——" they all began.

"One at a time," said Walter, quietly; "what's the matter now?"

"Some one keeps thumping at the back door, sir," explained the butler, "and imploring to be let in; but, with this unpleasant occurrence in the west wing, I did not like to open the door without your permission, or master's, and he is asleep, I think, sir, for I've knocked four times. These foolish maids will not let me move without them—what with the storm and all, sir." As he spoke, a flash of lightning brightened every corner of the hall; and the peal following as

quickly, with a deafening roar, seemed to threaten destruction to the building.

"In pity keep no one out in such a night as this, man," said Walter; "thieves do not knock for admittance; let them in instantly. If you're afraid," he said, with a light laugh, "I'll come with you;" and, followed by Everard and all the servants, save Dolly, who remained in the drawing-room with the half fainting Grace, Walter went to the door and opened it, as another flash, even more vivid than the last, seemed to rend the heavens, and a man staggered into the welcome shelter, bearing the slender form of a girl in his arms.

"I do not know if she is dead; oh! in mercy, see," he said.

He laid his burden down; and, pushing back the long, wet hair, which had fallen from its fastenings, he looked eagerly into the white face.

Walter started forward.

"It is Miss O'Brian," he said.

"Yes," said the man. "I found her beneath an oak tree here, taking shelter from the floods of rain. I told her it was not safe in such a storm; but she laughed, and said she did not want to get wet, and bid me go home, but I could not leave her in danger like that, and stood a few paces from the tree to watch her. At one awful flash, I rushed towards her; but, too late—she had fallen. Oh! is she dead?" he said again, as he brushed from his forehead the large drops which stood on it.

He was a singularly handsome fellow, though his dress and manner bespoke his rustic origin; and the rough, brown hands, with which he tenderly supported the fainting girl, shewed that by hard work his bread was earned.

"No—no; not dead," said Everard; "it

is a faint from fright; we want Dolly here. Go to Grace, Walter, and send Dolly; stay, I will go," he said, seeing Walter hesitate; and in a moment or two, Dolly had put them all aside, and Kathleen had opened her eyes on the large sofa in the servants' hall, wondering where she was, and at the anxious faces which were around her.

On Walter her gaze first rested.

"Mr. Ashleigh, what is this? what is the matter?"

"Exactly," he said, coming to her, and taking her hand; "we want to know what tempted a young lady so far from home in such weather?"

"Oh! I know; I went to see Mrs. Wakefield; she is so ill, and baby, too; and coming home, the storm came on—and Ralph warned me not to go under the tree. There he is—poor Ralph! I'm all right—not hurt a bit," she said; and she held her hand out

to the young man, who had stood apart while Walter spoke.

"I can't think what made me so silly. I am never frightened; but that fearful flash, after Ralph's warning, seemed to strike me; and I remember nothing till now. Did I faint?"

"Yes, you certainly did," answered Walter; for Ralph made no answer, only dropped the hand she had given him, and stood at the foot of the sofa, with his eyes fixed on Walter.

"I must go," she said; "the old people will be frightened."

"You must have a glass of wine, Miss," said Dolly, handing one to her, "before you go."

"Go! You cannot go in such weather as this," said Walter.

"It's clearing up fast, sir," said the young man; "if you'll have the kindness to lend

us an umbrella, I can take Miss O'Brian home."

"Wait a little," said Walter. "In another two minutes, the storm will be well over, I think; for I can see the moon struggling through the clouds. Miss O'Brian is scarcely recovered enough yet."

"I am, indeed," she said, rising; "and I would rather go. Come, Ralph; if you are really going my way, I would be glad of your escort. Thank you so much for your kindness, Mr. Ashleigh."

He held his hand out, but either she did not or would not see it; and, with a bow, which would have graced a court, the young girl passed out of the room, followed by Ralph.

Walter stood where she had left him a second or two; then, unheeding some remark of Dolly's, he went to the door out of which the two had gone, and, opening it, looked

out on the night. The thunder still growled in the distance; and an occasional flash of lightning gleamed in the sky, but far less vivid. The tempest seemed to have exhausted itself, as an angry child after a fit of passion; but, like the child, it could not at once recover its serenity. The tears were, as it were, still on its face; the angry gleam in its eye. The moon, like a gentle peacemaker, was trying to chase the clouds; and, by its fitful gleam, Walter could see the two figures moving on. They neither of them turned to look back; but he stayed till he could see them no longer; and then, closing the door, rejoined his brother and sister in the drawing-room. His father stood there, and Grace and Everard looked at Walter meaningly as he entered. His father did not speak; but he said:

"We've had a sharp storm, sir."

"Very."

There was a pause. Mr. Ashleigh stood still on the hearthrug, with his back to the fireplace, as he would before a fire.

Then Walter said, turning to his brother, "I believe that was a slight shock of electricity that poor girl had, Everard."

"Yes; I hope she will feel no ill effects. She is very beautiful. I have often heard you speak of her; but I never saw her before."

"Who are you speaking of, may I ask?" said his father.

"Of Kathleen O'Brian, sir; the grandchild of one of our farmers, who, caught in this fearful storm, fell, from either fright or the lightning, and was brought in here."

"Indeed! and, pray, why here? Could she not have been conveyed to her own home?"

"Rather far, sir, to carry a lifeless young lady," said Walter, coolly.

"But I don't choose, sir, your low-bred acquaintances to be encouraged here. It strikes me, people *do* come here, very often, whom I should object to have beneath my roof."

Grace raised a startled look to her brother's face.

"I think, sir, as a rule, you invite the persons who visit here," he answered, in the same cool, measured tone.

"Not all, sir," said his father, speaking through his clenched teeth. "And, now, listen to me—all three of you. I have my doubts as to who does come here in my absence; and—have a care — take this warning, given now, once for all: let me not catch in this house any one whom I should object to see here, or you may deeply rue it." He rang the bell sharply as he spoke, and desired Dolly to be sent to him—the three keeping an entire silence till she entered.

"Dolly," he said, "where are the keys of the west wing?"

"Oh! let me see; have I got them in my pocket? Yes; here they are, sir."

"Give them to me. Have you been there lately?"

"Yes, sir; of course, sir. I was there this evening. The girls are always hearing and seeing things and figures, and frightening themselves to fits. *I* wish the old place was pulled down. We shall have all the maids leaving; and I went to convince them there was nothing there."

"And did you convince them?"

"Why, no, sir; for, 'pon my word, I saw a figure in the room myself."

"Humph! Have you never seen one there before?"

"Well, really, sir, I've fancied so many times. One does get them nervous ideas when you're always hearing such dreadful

tales; but there was no fancy to-night. Bless you, sir! I see it as plain as I see you."

"Very well, then; to-morrow I will have the entrance boarded up—and the windows and the door into the orchard."

"Yes, sir, I would; that will be a capital plan—shut the ghosts in, and let them have a day by themselves."

"You will not require the keys any more."

"No, sir—of course not; but how about the furniture? Shan't we take that out?"

"I will see about that when the workmen are there. Good night, Dolly."

"Good night, sir."

"You had better go to bed, too, young people, and carry my words with you: no one is to enter this house whom I should not welcome. Good night;" and he walked out of the room.

Grace covered her face with her hands,

and burst into a passion of tears. Everard put his arm round her, and led her gently upstairs. Walter followed them. With a simple "Good night" to each other, they parted; but a look of settled determination was on Walter's face.

He went to town by a very early train in the morning; and the next day, to his astonishment, his father walked into the office, and, with a stern face, and in a cold, hard voice, said:

"Where is your sister, sir? tell me this moment."

CHAPTER XI.

It was a beautiful morning after the storm; and Kathleen came into the pretty breakfast room, looking fresh and lovely as the day itself. The old people had been very anxious about her, and feared, from the account Ralph gave them, that she would feel some ill effects from the shock which he believed she had received; but she assured them that the great heat, and walking so quickly to get home before the storm broke, caused her to faint, that was all; and that a night's rest was all she wanted. So, as I say, bright and fresh, as the sweet August morning itself; her ruddy brown hair—like the leaves in the woods, which were now changing to the

dusky tints of autumn—rolled up in many plaits round her head, amongst which nestled the little cluster of lace and ribbands she called a cap ; her clean print dress, with the same coloured bow at her throat that gleamed amongst the lace—she was a pleasant sight to see, this sweet morning : well in accordance with all its rich and glowing beauty. She stood for a moment at the open window, throwing crumbs to some little bantams, who were allowed to come on the lawn—in honour of being her special pets —and pulling sprays of the jasmine, which grew around the window. Then, catching sight of a figure coming up the road, she went out into the hall, and stood beneath the porch with a smile parting her rich, red lips, as the little gate opened, and Ralph Greybrooke entered.

"A letter for me, Ralph ?"

"Yes, Miss ; with the old post-mark, and

the same writing," he said, looking at her wistfully as she took the letter from him.

"Yes, my Irish friends are faithful, Ralph —are they not ?—

'Sure ye wouldn't forget your poor Terence,
Ye'll come back to ould Ireland again;'"

she sang softly, as she stood looking at the letter; and poor Ralph fancied an old memory had been awakened, and a forgotten promise, perhaps, re-called.

He stood looking at her—and, in his deep, brown, liquid eyes, there was an expression which would have pained her, if she had raised hers to meet them: so infinitely tender, so touchingly sad; but she seemed to have forgotten he was there—holding her letter, and yet not opening it: gazing at it, as though she could read its message through its cover.

At length he said gently and timidly, feeling he had no right to ask the question:

"Is it from Terence?"

"Oh, dear, no! Ralph," she said, looking up now laughingly and candidly in his face. "It is from a little Irish girl I know; that was only a line of a song, that her writing reminded me of; I know no Terence. Oh! sure I do, though; would I forget old Terence Magrath, the blind fiddler, that would play to us till our feet were tired with dancing;" and humming a few bars of an Irish jig, she danced a few steps.

"Ah! you can't dance a jig now, can you, Ralph?"

"No, no; dancing is not in my line," he answered.

"But it is good to dance, and laugh, and sing too, Ralph."

"This world is too sad for that, Miss—at least I've found it so."

"Nay, nay," she said, kindly. "If the old learn to think so, young hearts like yours

must not look so on life. With the dawn, all should be bright and gay. Only when the day grows old come the shadows; and when they lengthen in the evening, even then the rosy light of the setting sun speaks hopefully of another and, it may be, a still brighter day."

"Oh, Miss O'Brian!—if I could think and speak like you. But—there—there's where I feel it. I am like a clod of earth the ploughshare turns over, and—you—you are like the golden ears of corn that rise above it."

"And what would that corn be, Ralph, without the kindly clods, that warmed and nourished it? No one is better than his fellow in the sight of Him who made us all; and those who do the work He gives them, however lowly it may be, faithfully and well, merit as much honour and respect as the proudest peer in all the land—you *do*, good Ralph. Among all who work on my

grandfather's farm, there is no one he so trusts and honours."

"And yet you forbid—" he said, making a sudden step nearer to her, his voice trembling, and his bronzed handsome face growing pale even to his lips.

"Hush! hush! I'm called," she said; and she was gone, and he stood a second or two where she left him, and then, taking off his cap, he pushed the thick heavy masses of dark hair off his forehead, as though that was the weight that oppressed it; and lifting his large luminous eyes to the blue sky, he murmured some words, in which was the name of Kathleen, and went away through the garden—where the flowers were shaking the dew from their opening petals, as the warm sun awoke them, again to send their fragrance through the earth on the wings of the summer breeze—through the wet, cool grass of the meadow beyond, where the quiet cows

stood in groups fit for the pencil of a Paul Potter; and on again to a small cottage, standing by the road-side. He lifted the latch and went in. An old man sat smoking his pipe beside a table, on which stood a cup containing some weak tea without milk, and a plate with a small piece of bread and butter on it.

"Ah, Muster Greybrooke! good morrow to you—got a job for me?"

"Yes, Harris; the rats are so troublesome in the large barn again—will you bring the dogs down presently? And the master would like a well dug in the home meadow, if there is water—will you bring your stick and see?"

"Yes—all right; I'll be there. And I hope young Miss will come out and see about that water business; for she's as onbelieving about it as can be."

"Well, Harris, it's enough to stagger any-

one; but I've seen you do it so many times, and they say seeing's believing."

"Why, yes, bless you! I can't tell you why the thing does it; I only know as that 'ere stick will point down to where the water is—let me hold it as hard as I will; but Miss warnt believe it. She don't like believing what she can't get to the bottom of. She's a 'cute girl—she is. Will you sit down?—I ain't got much to offer you," he said, with a low chuckle, pointing to the table.

"No, thank you, Harris; I breakfasted long ago. Good morning;" and out he went again to see to the work about the farm; for he was Broderip's bailiff—earnest, faithful, and trustworthy, as Kathleen had said—but though he did his homely, rural work thus faithfully and well, in his heart was a great dull pain, and a vain longing, which many a night kept him tossing on his

bed, and which he wrestled with and fought against in vain.

Kathleen, an hour later, sat in the arbour in the garden—a basket of work at her feet; but in her hand the letter which Ralph had brought her that morning. No matter what else he had to do, he went regularly to the village for her letters, because he knew she liked to have them sooner than the old postman would bring them. This little service it was his delight to render to the girl, whose beautiful face was in his dreams—whose voice rang in his ears—whose every word he treasured and remembered—who was the joy and torture of his life.

She had read the letter once—twice; but was reading it again, with a smile upon her lips—half mirth, half sadness: "I was foolish, after all, to do this; perhaps, if poor little Kathleen—but, no matter; I must have patience a little longer. She seems to have

lost all hope; but I have not;" and then she took up the work—homely, plain work—over which her shapely fingers busied themselves, while she sang short snatches of Irish melodies in a low, tender voice and tutored style, which would have made Rupert Carrington wonder, had he heard it; and while she worked, a message came from the Priory to know how Miss O'Brian was—only Walter's card, with the simple words to inquire for Miss O'Brian. He had left word when he went to town with the man-servant that the card should be sent. She smiled, and told the messenger she was well—quite well—and thanked Mr. Ashleigh for sending; and then, going into the house, she was soon busied in the homely duties which made up her life.

The Ladies Murray had that same bright morning betaken themselves to the village, for Dr. Stillwell had gone with poor old

Poyntz; and so Gertrude assured Ma'mselle that exemption from all work was the proper thing under the circumstances, and a walk the most healthful and agreeable substitute for study. May, who had taken leave of the Duke for a week or two, was in a very restless mood, and was glad to go out or move about anywhere; for the pretty grey eyes were very red, and the bright dimpled face so sad, that even Gertrude had not the heart to laugh at her.

They betook themselves first to a shop—"the" shop, as it was called in the village; for it was the emporium for everything that was required, save butcher's meat. At one counter was bacon, butter, eggs, lard, cheese, string, brooms, brushes, dustpans, saucepans, soda, blue, hearth-stones, scouring-paper, boots and shoes, and Huntley and Palmer's biscuits; at the other, print dresses, calico, flannel, cotton, needles, shawls, bonnets, and,

as one box was labelled, "dress caps," which box was like Pandora's to Gertrude, so great was her anxiety to examine its contents, and see what Mrs. Sindon's notion of a dress cap was. Twice she had besought Lilian to let her buy one for Cook, that her curiosity might be gratified; but she had assured her that Cook would not wear it, and that it was foolish to throw money away. But Gertrude —who, when she had taken a fancy into her head, was very pertinacious, and managed generally to get what she wanted—had determined on making one of her village favourites a present of a dress cap, for she was quite sure good Mrs. Mason would think anything beautiful "my lady" gave her; and as Lilian had also some purchases to make in the way of holland and braid for her little scholars' pinafores, she determined to take this opportunity of inspecting the mysteries of the dress cap box.

The girls could hardly any of them suppress their laughter—so long had this joke existed—when Gertrude asked for the "dress-caps;" still less so when the articles were exhibited. Gertrude chose the one most covered with ribbands; and, having assured Ma'mselle in German "that this cap truly the veritable pattern worn by Mrs. Noah was," she refused Mrs. Sindon's offer to send it home, as she wished to carry it at once to her old friend. Of course, in this shop, all the gossip of the village was collected and retailed; and during all the time Mr. or Mrs. Sindon served their customers, they kept up a lively stream of conversation on the topics of the day.

"Dreadful storm yesterday, my lady?" she began, as she measured out Lilian's holland.

"Yes—very severe. I have not heard that any mischief was done, though, in this village."

"Well, no, my lady; not just in the village. But a rick was fired down in the meadows, and poor Kathleen O'Brian was struck, they do say, and carried home insensible."

"Kathleen O'Brian—who is she?"

"Broderip's grandchild, my lady."

"Oh, yes! the girl we admire—you know," said Gertrude, "and did not know her name."

"Yes, my lady; she is a wonderful good-looking young woman—so ladyfied, too; ain't she, miss?—my lady, I mean."

"I have never seen her, Mrs. Sindon; but we must be going now," said Lilian, who always endeavoured to escape Mrs. Sindon when she began any of her conversation, greatly to Gertrude's vexation, for she, to say truth, delighted in a bit of gossip.

"Let us go down the meadows, and inquire after the poor girl," said Gertrude

eagerly when they left the shop. "Broderip was one of our tenants once—and Auntie likes the old man so much."

"We may as well walk there as anywhere else," replied May.

"Yes, certainly; and I should like to see her so much."

"But you are not likely to see her if she has been struck by lightning," said Edith; "so, if your polite intentions are simply founded on curiosity, I think you will have a lost walk."

"Oh, no! but it is kind to ask for a neighbour that have a misfortune so large," interposed Ma'mselle. "And we have no walk elsewhere of obligement—so let us go."

"We shall be fried—that's all," said Edith; "not an atom of shelter all the way."

"Edith, you're dreaming! Why those grand old trees in Bourne Park hang over

two of the paths through the fields; and, in short, it's an avenue all the way."

"A slight difference of opinion," said Lilian, smiling. "Let Edith come home with me; and Ma'mselle can take Gertrude and May. But had you not better tell Mrs. Mason to send up for the cap, Gerty; or tell Mrs. Sindon to send it to the old lady?"

"I have got it here—I am going to carry it myself, Lil. Half the fun is to see the old dame's delight."

"Well you must go there first, and down to the meadows after; but don't be late for luncheon."

"No, no—a capital arrangement. Come along, Ma'mselle—good-bye, girls."

They went on through the village till they came to a picturesque group of cottages, with a piece of ground before them, laid out in separate gardens. An inscription over

the middle cottage gave the information that these were the Medlicott Almshouses, founded in 1706, by Sir Thomas Medlicott. They knocked at the first, and it was opened by an old woman in a clean, dark, blue print gown, white apron, and checked handkerchief over her neck, and a very high muslin cap, covered with a gauze ribband of the fashion of some fifty years ago: a check—red, yellow, and blue. She looked over her large silver-rimmed spectacles at her visitors, and then, with a joyous smile, and glad voice, she said:

"Oh, my dear ladies! come in—come in. Oh! I be just pleased to see you!"

"We cannot stay long, Mrs. Mason," said Gertrude, as they seated themselves in the pretty cottage, where the furniture—all of old oak—shone like mirrors: the old eight-day clock, the arm-chair, the table with its twisted legs—treasures of early wedded

days—and which Gertrude never failed to charm the old woman by admiring.

After the admiration at the cap had subsided, they said they must go, for they were going down to Broderip's farm before luncheon, to enquire for his grandchild.

"Ah, poor dear!—I heard she'd been hurted—it was a tempest, surely. What a handsome, winsome young lass she is—do you know her, ladies?" asked the old woman.

"No—we have only seen her in church, and passing in the village. How long has she been with her grandfather? Can you tell us all about her, Mrs. Mason?" enquired Gertrude eagerly.

"Well, my dear lady, only just this; that I know Broderip had a daughter as took service in Ireland, and married there an Irish soldier, who died and left her and her little girl but badly provided for; but

Ellen's mistress she was very kind to her, and got her one or two nurse children, and one way or other she pulled along till she fell in a bad way—consumptive, I believe,—and then the old folks bid her send little Kathleen to them. I don't rightly know if the mother is living, or whether she ain't dead since Kathleen come; but, leastways, she's been with the old folks a matter of a twelvemonth. The mother was as pretty a gal as ever you see; but as fair as the child is dark—bless you! her hair was as light as my Lady Edith's. Mistress Medlicott, she knowed her right well. I can't see as Kathleen favours her mother at all—may be she's like the father. He must have been a terrible good-looking chap, if she is—that's all I know. Poor old Jane Broderip, next door, is old Broderip's sister, and she tells me all about them. She's been down there all day to-day, and when she comes back, I shall

hear how the poor girl is. They're mortal fond of her, and no wonder. She's that steady and useful, and clever too—why she writes poetry quite beautiful, I'm told."

"Oh! I should so like to see her," said Gertrude, "and talk to her. I wonder if she is too ill to see us to-day.

"Ah! I can't tell; but I'm sure, my lady, you'll like her. Why when she comes into her aunt's little room next door, she seems to light the bit of a place up like."

"I am more curious than ever. Good-bye, Mrs. Mason. Come along, May—let us get on; I must go now. Somehow this girl seems to me mixed up with our destiny," said Gertrude, as, putting her arm through her sister's, she hurried her down the little village street.

"Oh! nonsense, Gertrude!—that is just one of your romantic fancies. Heigho! I wonder what Philip is doing now—writing

to me, perhaps. He promised he would. Is not it funny to call him Philip ?"

"I don't know ; I haven't tried," said Gertrude.

"No—of course, not yet ; but you will, I suppose. What made you first think he cared about me, Gertrude ?"

"I don't know—you both looked so silly at each other."

May laughed ; and poor Ma'mselle implored that they would not walk so fast—the heat was so "insupportable ;" so, more quietly, they pursued their way to the farm in the meadows. May, glad to find so ready a listener as Gertrude to her one theme of conversation — "Philip ;" and patient Ma'mselle, content to linger a little way behind with "Nep," occupied with her own thoughts, which were more practical and less romantic than the talk of the young, bright girls, who were looking

forth into life so joyously, and who knew so little of its stern and less inviting side.

Rupert Carrington was seated in his quarters writing some letters. He had been up two nights with his uncle. No signs of returning sense had shewn itself, and the physician said he was decidedly weaker, and he could give no hopes of him. He had just told his man he wished him to take a note to the War Office, when the door of his room opened, and Walter entered.

"My dear fellow, I'm so glad to see you. I was just writing to you—sit down."

"I had five minutes to spare, so I jumped into a hansom to come and see how you are getting on. What's the news?"

"Bad as can be—only a question of time."

"Dear, dear! I'm very sorry."

"Yes—it's a bad business in every way."

"Things are rather blue our way," said

Walter; "we have had an unpleasant disturbance again — my sister has left home."

"Left home!" echoed Rupert; "where has she gone?"

"I do not, unhappily, know; but I believe —though I cannot get the exact truth from my father—that he aggravated her beyond her patient endurance after I left on Monday, and she has run away; for, yesterday, he came to my place, to my great surprise, and demanded my sister. I knew nothing of her absence, although, of course, he suspected me. I have sent to the only two likely places where she might be, and she is not at either; and you may suppose I am not too happy about her."

"Good gracious me! I should think not, my dear Pop. Can I do anything for you? My poor dear uncle does not know, and therefore does not miss me. I will go any-

where—do anything for you," said Rupert, excitedly.

"Thank you, old fellow, I am sure you will; but I am perfectly at sea: I do not know what course to take. I have telegraphed to Everard to come up and talk to me, and hear his ideas on the subject. My delightful parent only stamped and raved, and I could obtain but little information from him, so I hope to see the dear old man before night: he takes things so gently and quietly. There is a lady—well, I don't see why I'm obliged to keep it secret from you if I don't choose; my father deserves little at my hands, that I should trouble myself to keep his counsel. My mother, Rupert, is living; my father ill-treated her, though she loved him as I believe only women know how to love. She bore it till it grew beyond her; and then she left him, took a small house in London—without letting him know her

whereabouts—coming at intervals to see us when he was out or away. He thinks her abroad. She implored us by our love to her to stay on with him. We were all too old when she left for the law to sanction her taking us; and the small pittance he is compelled to allow her, she can only exist on herself. When he bought this old place, its bad reputation delighted us; for we at once saw a plan of seeing our mother oftener. She has been the ghost ever since we have lived there; but at length he has, we fear, discovered our plot, and his wrath has, I suspect, fallen on poor Grace. What can have become of her, Rupe?"

"I cannot imagine. This is a romance indeed. You have been to your mother, you say?"

"I have; to her, and a kind aunt whom Grace often visits, that she may see her

mother; but neither of them have heard of her, and you may imagine my mother's state. She declared my father has made away with her. Poor dear mother! her excitable temperament and warm temper have helped to increase our sorrow."

"But your father came to you to ask for her?"

"Yes, and he seemed alarmed, as well as angry. As much as he can love anything he loves Grace, I believe. He would not harm her, I am sure; but where can she be?"

"You will, no doubt, hear from her in the course of the day: she can have no secrets from you."

"No; if she has gone of her own free will I know I shall hear of her."

"You will have Everard with you before you leave the office; and then you had better both come here, and we will decide

what is best to be done. Oh dear, Pop! this world is a very wicked place, I think."

"Well, I don't know, Rupe; the world is well enough: it's the people in it that are such a bore. But I must really go back now. I will be here again as soon as I can."

At five o'clock the two brothers entered Rupert's quarters.

"Tell him all you know, Everard," said Walter, when they were seated.

"It is little enough, I grieve to say," said Everard, who looked pale and worn. Mental anxiety, or any overstrain of the mind, showed so quickly on his delicate, sensitive organization. "I only know," he continued, "that my father and Grace had a very stormy interview on Monday: that is to say, he did the part of the thunder," he said, with a sad smile, "and Grace the rain. I at length ventured to interfere, and sent Grace

to bed, letting him expend his fury on me. It did not hurt me as much as poor Gracie."

"Poor old man!" said Walter, with that wistful tenderness he so often assumed towards his brother. Everard looked up, with his sweet smile, in his brother's face, and went on:

"He exhausted all the graceful epithets in his vocabulary on me—which I suppose he had sufficient decent feeling not to heap on his daughter—and then, finding it produced so little effect on me, he took himself off to bed. I was not surprised in the morning that Grace did not appear at breakfast: they said she had a headache. About twelve o'clock, a letter was brought, which Dolly told me afterwards seemed to agitate her very much; and two hours afterwards, when the luncheon gong sounded, she was not to be found, and my father, raging and storming, declared you must

know all about it, and set off to see you at once. Dolly, who is very clever, as you know, and thoroughly knows my father, says it is a plot of his. We, of course, thought she had gone to her mother, until we had your telegram saying 'not.' What is to be done?"

"Have you ascertained who brought the letter which she received the day she went?" asked Rupert.

"Dolly says a village boy brought it."

"A village boy? Was Mr. Ashleigh in the house at the time the letter came?"

"I think not, but I really do not know. I pass all my time in-doors nearly, in my own room. Let us go again to Aunt Clarinda, and consult with her. I, you know, can give her fuller information."

"Yes," said Walter, "but our poor mother is in such an agony. Let us go to aunt's, and take her to Blandford Street, and

we can hold a 'family council.' What do you say to that, Rupe?"

"Yes; that is decidedly the best thing to do. There can be no question in my mind, from all you tell me, that your father has managed to have your sister removed somewhere, to keep her from her mother. I should act on this supposition."

"Yes. Then we will start at once for Aunt Clarinda's; come along, Everard."

"Come back here, and we will have some dinner; and I shall learn what you have decided on. You will not go back to night, Ashleigh?" he said, turning to Everard.

"No; I told Dolly not to expect me. Poor little woman! she will have to bear my father's anger. I told her to say that I had gone in search of my sister, and I think she rather liked the job. She is not the least afraid of him; and when

she thinks he deserves to be annoyed, likes doing it."

"Well, let us be off now, Everard," said Walter; "and you can sleep at my place to-night, and we will neither of us go home without some trace of our poor Grace."

CHAPTER XII.

"Oh, Lilian!" said Gertrude, rushing into the room, just as the first gong sounded for luncheon, "I have seen her, and talked to her, and she is lovely—oh! so lovely and so sweet—with just a slight Irish brogue, that makes all she says so charming and arch."

"Then, she is not hurt?" said Lilian, smiling at her enthusiasm.

"No, no. She only fainted, she says, from heat and fatigue."

"Who is this?" said Auntie, who had been busily engaged with the newspaper.

"Old Broderip's grandchild, Auntie dear, who lives with him. It was reported in the village that she had met with an

accident in the storm, so we have been down to see after her; but it was a false alarm, and she is so lovely, Auntie—*exquisite.*"

"Dear little Gertrude! she always deals in superlatives," said her aunt, smiling, and patting her cheek.

"Yes, Gertrude's geese are all swans," said Edith.

"Well, I'm sure it's much better to see through rose-coloured glasses than yellow ones; is it not, Auntie?"

"Oh, yes! my child. I think extravagant admiration is better then detraction; but if the admiration is proved to *be* extravagant, it may be mistaken for a different feeling. Large expressions are seldom wise ones, as I often tell you."

"But, Auntie darling, do you mean to say that if you heard a girl call another exquisitely beautiful, you would think she was jealous of her?"

"If, by common consent, that other was considered very moderately good-looking, I should certainly think the young lady had some object for such a statement, and that she was anxious her hearers should *not* think her jealous."

"Oh, dear!" said poor Gertrude, ruefully, "I shall be always leading people into mistakes then; for I can't help using great big words: language is so poor to express one's feelings."

"I think it is our bad use of poor language, more than any fault of its own," said Auntie. "Sometimes I think the young folks have learnt foreign languages until they have forgotten their own. But run away now, love; for I can hear Pritchard taking in the luncheon."

At this moment a servant entered the library with a letter on the salver for the Lady May, which, with her face crimsoning,

she took; and luncheon from, that moment, became to her a work of supererogation. How many times she read it: locked in her own room—beneath the trees in the garden. Every moment that could be secured alone, the sweet "old" words—"old," yet always new and always sweet—were read again and again, and pressed to May's rosy lips, and placed beneath her pillow at night, and carried with her always; till in time it grew the veriest rag of a letter ever seen, but dearer to May than any jewel she owned, and with any of which she would have gladly parted rather than that worn paper. What would Gertrude have given for one peep—just to see how it began and ended; but she knew it was in vain to ask, so tried to suppress her curiosity, and content herself, as Lilian smilingly advised her, by waiting until she had one of her own.

"Ah! I don't know when that will be, Lil," she had answered. "You girls will get the pick, and leave me only the rubbish: and I won't have that. I'll have someone worth having, or no one at all. I'd rather die an old maid, than marry some men I see—most men I may say: so few come up to my standard."

"To be an old maid is not such a frightful alternative, is it, Gertrude?" asked Lilian, looking up from her work at her little sister, who was perched on the top of the library steps, where she had mounted to get a book, when this interesting conversation, suggested by the first love letter, had commenced.

"Well, yes; I think it's rather a loveless, joyless state of existence—only to be tolerated for want of a better."

"Gladly endured, Gertrude, rather than that most wretched existence an ill-assorted marriage," answered Lilian; "and they have much compensation, those old maids! nice

old maids! their life is so useful—so valuable. They have half-a-dozen homes in place of one, and they are always wanted and always welcome."

"You said nice old maids!—exactly; but how few there are. Why, Lil, imagine me one! I should be bitter, exacting, dictatorial, and selfish to the last degree; and as to men, I should hate the very sight of them, for I should feel as though I owed them all a grudge for leaving me to such a fate."

"What amount of rubbish are you talking?" said Edith, lifting her head from the drawing she had been engaged on at the other end of the room.

"No rubbish at all, my dear. Lil and I are engaged in a very sensible discourse."

"Lilian spoils you by letting you go on as she does: a child like you to be for ever talking of men and love!"

"May as well talk of them as think of them, Edith. Better too, perhaps; it's a sort of safety valve; and Lilian can correct me if I say anything wrong, you know, or unbefitting my tender years," she said, in a demure voice, folding her hands and putting on what she herself called a "goodie face."

"Don't be absurd, child, pray. I really think you grow more frivolous every day."

"Do you *really* now? Never mind, dear. you have sense and gravity enough for the whole family. How jolly it is sitting up here: I can look down on everybody."

"You look very ridiculous sitting up there. Tell her to come down, Lilian."

"Why should she, Edith, dear? she's quiet, and out of mischief," said Lilian, laughing.

"Quiet? her tongue has been running nineteen to the dozen."

"Well, now look, Edith; to oblige you,

I will come down. See me fly!" and, extending her arms, she sprang from the steps almost into the arms of Mr. Prescott, who, at the moment, was shewn in.

He stepped back in astonishment; and poor Gertrude, in half angry confusion, said:

"It's all Edith's fault!"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Prescott; "how you frightened me. I thought it was some bright denizen of another world, suddenly making a descent into this sublunary sphere."

"Why, Mr. Prescott, you stole in so gently, you startled us," said Lilian, rising to shake hands with him; "we never heard you ring."

"Now, that appears to be a remarkable fact; but you will be instantly assured that it is by no means remarkable. I did *not* ring—the door was open, and your man was in the hall. I am come," he con-

tinued, "with my mother and father's cards of congratulation, and apology for not coming in person; but they were compelled to go in an opposite direction."

"Thank you, Mr. Prescott; my aunt will be here directly. Edith, love, tell her, will you?"

"She is here, Lily," said Edith; as, the door opening gently, the little lady walked in, followed by May.

A blush overspread all May's face as Mr. Prescott bowed over the little hand she held out to him.

"Are you come to take pity on us and dine with us, Mr. Prescott," said Mistress Medlicott, giving him the hearty welcome she always did, looking at, and speaking to him with tender earnestness.

"Thank you, I fear not; there is an unpleasant party at home, which will prevent my having such a happiness. Imagine me,

when you are seated round your social board, whispering sweet nothings to an animal, with scarlet hair, richly ornamented with bright blue ribbands, a very gorgeous, plaid, satin dress, and a Scotch accent that grates on the drum of your ear, and reminds one of the scratching of a bad pencil on a slate."

The girls laughed heartily, and Edith said:

"And you are obliged to whisper soft nothings to a person whom you admire so much?"

"Yes, Lady Edith. I am of such a self-sacrificing nature, that—though devoted to another, worshipping at another's shrine, and all that sort of thing, you know—at the request of my mother I smother my feelings, do violence to them I may say, and sacrifice them on the altar of friendship."

"Dear me, Mr. Prescott!" said Gertrude, laughing; "that is really too hard on you.

Is your mother aware of the extent of sacrafice you are making?"

"No, no. I bear it in silence, but I am growing thin under it: I have an inward sorrow here, but I conceal it."

"Yes; you do succeed there admirably, Mr. Prescott."

"Ah, my lady! you are severe on me. You do not fully enter into the torture of a hidden grief. We will change the subject. May I enquire after the health of the gentleman who is given to midnight peregrinations? — the 'no 'arm with two tails.'"

"Oh! poor old man, he's gone away altogether," answered Miss Medlicott, who had sat smiling as the young man ran on with his string of nonsense. "He quite broke down, and gave up his situation."

"Poor old Poyntz!"

"And the Duke," continued Auntie,

smiling slyly at blushing May, "left you yesterday morning?"

"Yes, to our great sorrow. We miss him awfully. I had a great task with him, I assure you. I thought he would lose the train, for he kept forgetting everything, and perpetually coming back again, and giving the wildest orders to his man, at which the unfortunate stared in amazement. It is my private opinion that he has not been quite in his right senses for some days. But, really, Miss Medlicott," he said, in a low voice, drawing his chair nearer to her, "he's a first-rate fellow, and no mistake."

"He is, I believe. I am very well satisfied. Tell your good mother so with my love," she added in the same tone. "We are all very happy and content."

"That is well; but I must be going, really. I promised faithfully not to be long, as these painful Scotch cousins are expected

to arrive this afternoon. Lady Edith," he said, turning to her, "I think you said, the other evening, you wished so much to sketch the old abbey in Mr. Morland's grounds? He says he shall be most flattered if you will do so."

"He does?" exclaimed the girls altogether. "Why, what charm have you worked on him, Mr. Prescott? He is the most disagreeable old creature."

"Yes; and has refused so many sketching parties permission," said Edith, while a somewhat conscious smile played on her lips. "How kind of you to remember my wish; but I had no intention, when I expressed it, that you should beard the lion in his den for the sake of my foolish fancy."

He made some reply to her in a low tone, which she did not appear to hear, and then said:

"Oh! he is my father's tenant; therefore, we have a little power over him."

"Indeed! I was not aware Oatlands was Sir John's property," said Mistress Medlicott.

"Were you not? He has not had it very long. It divides Oakdean from some more land of his, so that when it was in the market, he thought he would buy it; and I believe he has some idea, when this crusty old party's lease is out, of throwing the two estates into one. It will make a grand place, then. The fault of Oakdean is, that there is not enough land for the size of the house; but I must go—as I said before, I believe—but 'parting is such sweet sorrow, etc.' Good-bye, Mistress Medlicott; 'tis an age since you honoured Oakdean with a visit."

"It is. I shall come now shortly, and have a long chat with your mother, to whom commend me heartily."

"How silent the room seems now he's gone," said Gertrude, with a sigh.

"Dear me, Gertrude! are you so very charmed with him?" asked Lilian.

"Charmed? no; but he's such fun and rattles on so, that when he's gone, a 'mourne silence' seems to reign."

"A delightful calm, I think," said Edith, going on with the drawing his visit had interrupted.

"That's very ungrateful of you, Edith, after the dear kind fellow has taken such pains to gratify your wish," said May, warmly.

"Halloa, May! I'll tell Philip," laughed Gertrude.

"There's a kind of reflected glory on him, you know, Gertrude," answered Edith; "in May's eyes, he's a kind of shadow of his Grace. What can be dearer to May

than the Duke, but the Duke's most intimate friend?"

"True; really, it was kind of him to think of your wish to sketch the Abbey."

"Very extraordinary his recollecting it; for I did not even say it to him. I was talking to Everard Ashleigh at dinner about drawing, and I merely said that was the only pretty thing in the neighbourhood I had not a sketch of, and I would give anything to do it. I did not know he even heard me."

"Perhaps he hears everything *you* say, Edith," said Gertrude.

"Now then, Gertrude; there you go again. I beg you will not begin any of that vulgar joking with me about a man I have seen but once in my life."

"Three times, Edith. Besides, dear," continued Gertrude, unheeding the rebuke,

"once is sometimes as good as a hundred times. I *do* believe in love at first sight. I know Katie Pagett told me that she saw her husband for the first time at a fancy fair; never even spoke to him, but vowed she would never marry any other man; and she married him six years after—there, now."

"Lily darling, what's the matter?"

"Nothing much; I'm so warm. I shall go in the garden a little while."

"Do; shall I come with you?"

"Oh, no! thank you. I shall only go for a little while with my book under the trees, till the dressing gong goes."

Mistress Medlicott had been lying back in her chair, with half closed eyes, as if asleep, whilst the young ones had been talking—Prescott's visit always made her thoughtful—but she had heard the few last

words, and had looked earnestly at Lilian, and noted the sudden change of her face. She rose a few moments after, and walking through the conservatory, passed on into the garden, and joined Lilian under the limes.

END OF VOL. I.

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